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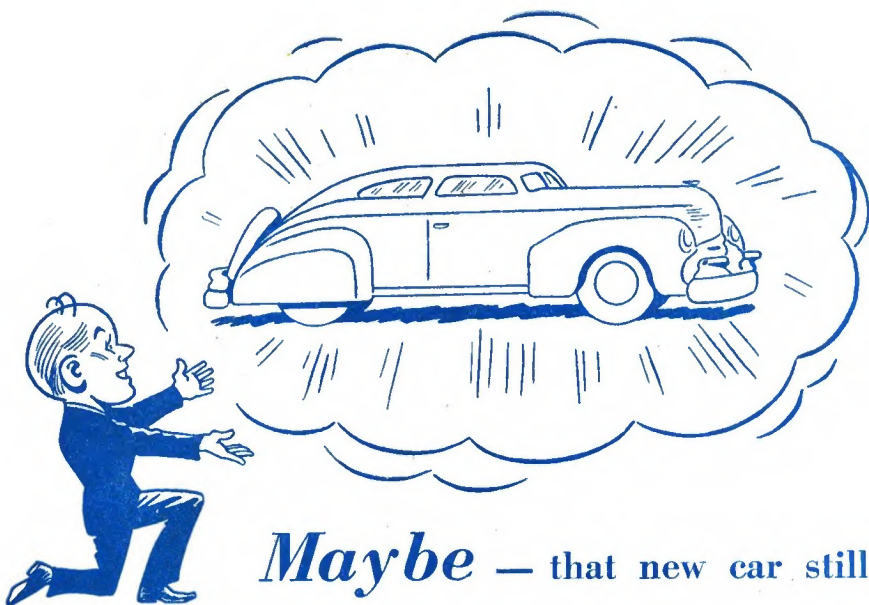
STORIES

A
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EASY DEATH

by TED
STRATTON



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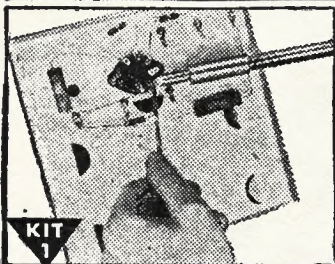
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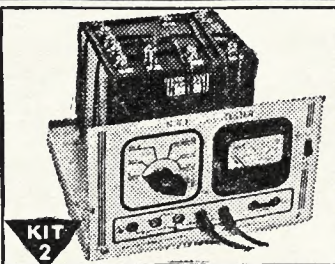


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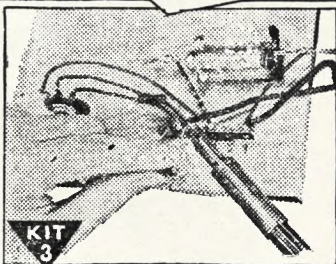
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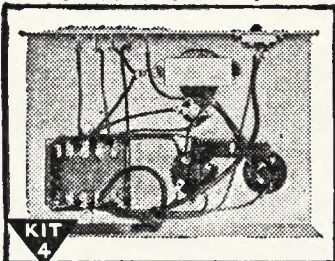
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I send you Soldering Equipment and Radio Parts; show you how to do Radio soldering; how to mount and connect Radio parts; give you practical experience.



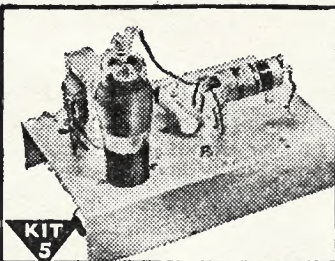
KIT 2
Early in my course I show you how to build this N.R.I. Tester with parts I send. It soon helps you fix neighborhood Radios and earn EXTRA money in spare time.



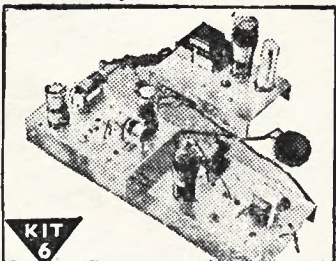
KIT 3
You get parts to build Radio Circuits; then test them; see how they work; learn how to design special circuits; how to locate and repair circuit defects.



KIT 4
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PRIVATE DETECTIVE STORIES

Vol. 20
No. 2

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1947



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COVER PAINTING BY GEORGE J. ROZEN

The names and descriptions of all characters appearing in this magazine are entirely fictitious. If there is any resemblance, either in name or description, to any living person, it is purely a coincidence.



MADGE BINDAMIN, Editor

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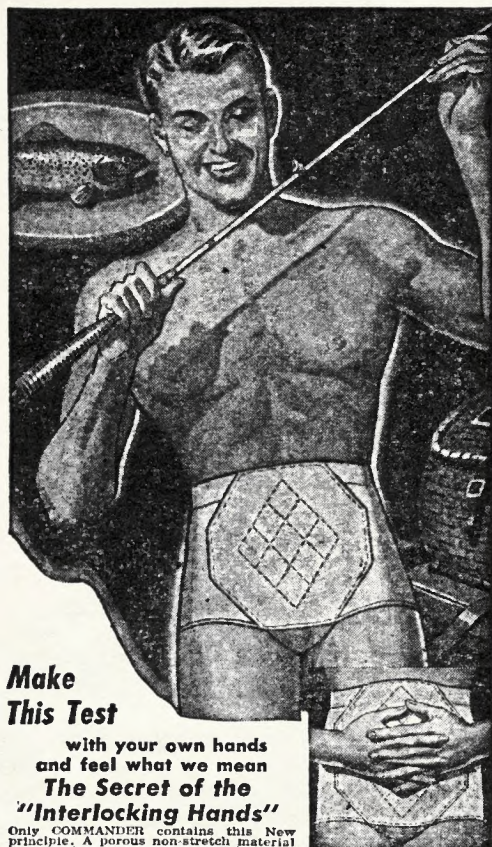
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This private op Steven J. Rainey played many games but the game of "who writes to murder in green ink" could lead to no less a finish than an

EASY DEATH



DETEKTIVE JIM DALGREN sat on one corner of the battered oak desk. He swung a trousered leg back and forth with the measured speed of a shuttle train that is always on

the move but never gets any place. After the greetings were over, he wanted to know: "What's on your mind, Steve?"

By TED STRATTON

She came to life so fast
that I was caught off my
guard. Her gun blasted.



Illustrated by Frank Volp

I said: "I could be interested in the Kellett-Nason embezzlement."

"How interested?"

"Say a week's work."

"Not the old college try, eh?"

I leaned back on the single chair. My hundred-ninety pounds made the chair creak but it didn't break. "Al Cramer over at Aircraft offered me was a hundred bucks. I'm not the greedy type but I can't afford to chase rainbows. Say I give the case a

week's work. If there's progress, then I'll hit the line like a Notre Dame fullback."

One of his forefingers began to tap the desk in rhythm with the swinging leg. "Glad to be out of the army, fellow?"

"You can advertise that. Corporal Rainey can't compare with Steven J. Rainey, Private Investigations."

"That initial 'J'. Wasn't your middle name Xavier?"

"I like the sound of J much better, Jim."

"Where's your office?"

"Sixth floor, Terminal Insurance Building."

The shuttling leg stopped a moment, then resumed its journey to nowhere. "You private ops are spoiled. Try slaving on a city salary for a change. Did Cramer offer a reward?"

"Fifteen percent of any cash recovered. He was plenty burned up about the theft. Said the money hadn't been insured, that the two employees hadn't been bonded, that he'd fired the treasurer because of the carelessness. He said that even if I did recover some cash, which he doubted I could, they stood to lose plenty because Kellett and the Nason girl had had two months to spend it."

I pulled out a crumpled pack of cigarettes, offered one to Jim. He shook his head.

I lit a cigarette, tossed the burned match at a brass spittoon, and continued: "Cramer said this Kellett was a louse, that he must have pitched plenty of woo at the Nason girl to get her to steal the twenty-six thousand dollars."

"It's a lot of lettuce for a little woo. Anything else on your mind, fellow?"

"You think it's worth a gamble?"

Jim had a slim build and a shock of hair that had been black before I enlisted. During my absence from Newark, New Jersey, someone had salted the black liberally. Fine lines curved around his mouth like pin scratches on mahogany veneer.

His eyes were the same. Still dark brown and sleepy. They'd been sleepy when we'd palled around together in eighth grade over in an Ironbound District school. A fast brain behind those eyes. I knew he had been on the Kellett-Nason case because Cramer, the president of Aircraft, had blistered Jim's hide when we'd talked. I couldn't help wondering why Jim hadn't cracked it.

"Stop wondering," he said, as if I'd been sending him telegrams about my thoughts. "We needed time."

"You fellows have to horse around. What happened?"

"I had the case a week, with a couple of men, long enough to get in spade work. We didn't get more time because the commissioner pulled us off. We're undermanned for one thing. The new mayor is a reformer. He told the commissioner to clean up the wire rooms and numbers racket. When we got a couple of gang killings dumped in our laps, we couldn't get back to the Aircraft case. You want to see what we've got in our files, is that it?"

"I'm not going to burgle police headquarters."

"If we give you a look, Steve, it's not because you and I wear the same old Newark public school ties. I phoned a man to pry Cramer off our necks."

"Who?"

"A man who could stick an idea into Cramer's onetrack brain. Cramer took the hint and phoned you to come see him."

That's how Jim Dalgren fools people. You watched his sleepy eyes and told him you were out of the army, back on the job, same old address, and all the while he was ten city blocks in front, waiting for you to come along in a lumbering dray. "Okay, Jim, you got me in the case. You tying any strings to that?" I asked.

"Want any advice?"

"The brass hats convinced me I was a moron. What's the angle?"

He let that slide over his shoulder and stood erect. "Give it the old college try, fellow, or no peek at our files."

I wasn't too busy. It looked like a quiet week of work for a hundred sure bucks. If the police had some angles on the case, maybe I could cash in on the reward money. Fifteen percent of what Kellett and Nason hadn't spent was a lot of money. "Okay, Jim, I'll hit the line like a Notre Dame fullback."

HE opened a side door and disappeared into a room where typewriters clack-clacked like some distant machine-gun fire I'd once heard on the Tinian beachhead. I had time on my hands and studied a blue-bottle fly that crawled up a pane of glass that needed its face scrubbed. There was a peculiar odor permeating the office. It

smelled like lysol and honesty, like political interference and suspects' sweat.

Jim returned and tossed a folder on the desk. "Read it and forget you came here, fellow. Phone if you want help. You won't get it but phone anyway. Now I gotta go see a man about a horse."

He strode toward the corridor door. I called out: "You mentioned advice, before you got interested in horses!"

"Did I, auntie?" he asked cryptically, and went out.

I opened the file. In a week's time, they'd done a thorough job. I skipped a lot of the leg-and-report stuff and boiled it down. On a Saturday morning two months back, Danny Kellett and Barbara Nason, employees at Aircraft, had stolen twenty-six grand in cash that had been cluttering the company safe. The girl had the combination.

The pair had been seen last at Vallachi's Sales Service at two o'clock that same afternoon when they'd paid cash for a 1946 Buick sedan, a blue-toned job with license number E-4-8270. Vallachi said they drove west along Broad Street.

The theft had been discovered on Monday morning, which gave the two thieves a forty-eight hour start. On Broad Street they'd pulled down the curtain behind the Buick's rear bumper and nobody had lifted it since.

Kellett. A tall, slender, curly black-haired guy with dark eyes and a sharp nose. He missed being a dashing, handsome fellow because the features were a little too pointed, the eyes too crafty. Twenty-seven years old and a no-good guy.

He'd clerked for four months in the same office with the Nason girl. Kellett's father and mother were dead and he had no other relatives according to the file. An aunt had raised him, bailed him out of several police cases, one of which had involved the theft of a Ford roadster when Kellett had been seventeen years old. He had a mole the size of a dime under his left ear.

Barbara Nason. A blonde. A round face, pale cheeks, washed-out blue eyes behind rimless glasses. A thin, unexciting figure. It's amazing how such a figure acquires curves when it knows the way to twenty-six grand. She'd had an eight years' spotless record at Aircraft.

Parents and all relatives, so a detailed notation said, lived three thousand miles

away at Spokane. Three telegrams over a period of six weeks from the Spokane Police Department insisted that neither Kellett nor the Nason girl had showed there yet.

One more item.

Barbara Nason was thirty-five years old. That made the story as commonplace as rising prices, as monotonous as the multiplication tables. Lonely girl avoids spinsterhood by cutting a sharp corner with a smooth talking guy who'd never been able to hold any job more than six months.

A cold, dim trail to follow. Tough?

That depends. Sometimes you bog down fast on hot trails because the quarry is wary, suspicious, and full of elusive plans. Often it's easier to nose out a cold trail because two months' time lulls suspicions, promotes a guard-down attitude, encourages a feeling of we-got-away-with-it. That produces carelessness. Amateurs also succumb to a desire to communicate with old friends and relatives.

"Did I, aunties?" Jim had suggested when he left.

Mrs. A. K. Merian, the aunt, lived at West Plank Road where she ran a boarding house. She and her husband had been given routine questioning and Jim had put a tail on Mrs. Merian and started a mail check. Maybe he'd tapped her telephone. If he had, there was no record in the file and he'd have been a fool to put that fact in writing.

It looked like a lot of tedious, routine leg work so I stuck the file in the desk drawer and went out the same door that Jim had used. The only man I could see about horses was an elderly Dutchman who ran a saloon over on Mulberry Street, and thought that a horse ran faster when you stuck two bucks on its nose.

CHAPTER II

Fugitive From Justice

TONIGHT I'D DINED at the Plank Road Grille. The proprietor should have renamed it Ptomaine Grille to give the customers an even break.

I'd been in this bedroom in the Merian boarding house for four days. I sat on a tipsy rocking chair and rode it like a cowboy breaking in a horse.

The room was big enough for a single bed, a bureau with a cracked mirror, and a

solid wooden table topped by a goose-necked lamp and a Gideon Bible with ROBERT TREAT HOTEL stamped on the flyleaf. There was a floor lamp that might have been new in 1931. The rug was as frayed as a husband's excuses.

I'd tried to sleep on the bed. The mattress was harder than the blonde behind the cigar counter of a third-rate hotel.

A breeze perfumed with the odor of burning dumps in the meadows stirred the curtains at the single open window. Lint fluttered to the floor and I didn't bother to pick it up. Down below someone grumbled, "Dadgum, the daggummed briers," and I knew that old man Merian must be puttering with the rambler roses at the side.

I picked up one of the three law books that Richard Forsythe, a lawyer in the Terminal Building, had loaned me for window dressing. I had never heard of any "tort" actions before, so it seemed like a good idea to fill my mind with some more legal mumbo-jumbo while I waited for a break. That's about all there is to detective work. Long hours, waits, routine checking that bores a guy—then the break.

"In general," the text began pontifically, "a tort is any wrongful act (not breach of contract) for which a civil action—"

Knuckles as soft as lovers' kisses on my door. Tap-tap, pause, tap. Long pause. Tap-tap, pause, tap. Tentative, cautious, mysterious.

It might be anybody. Or it might be one of the seven other roomers who rented single rooms off the second-floor corridor. As far as I had been concerned, the roomers were only shadows brushed against in the mad scramble to capture one of the two lavatories at the back, or vague voices overheard downstairs asking Mrs. Merian if there was any mail today. None of them knew me or who I was unless Mrs. Merian had told them what I had told her.

"I want a quiet room because I do a lot of work at home. I'm Thomas Ryerson, a law clerk with Richard Forsythe in the Terminal Insurance Building on Market Street." Two weeks rent had satisfied Mrs. Merian.

Tap-tap, pause, tap, on my door.

A stubborn visitor, so I said: "Come in."

Nobody came in.

I got up off the tipsy rocker and played butler. A woman stood outside the door. She had her left forefinger pressed against

her lips. Her right eye winked significantly. Her right forefinger tapped her chest once, then pointed past me into the bedroom. I understood dumb language because I had listened to enough brass hats sound off in the army. I stepped to one side and let her enter.

She crossed to the table, shoved the goose-necked lamp aside, which made a little cleared space on top. She sat down on that space, crossed her legs, and displayed several inches of stocking above the knees.

She leered and said: "I'll bet you don't know who I am!" Her voice had a soft, light sound like rain on the window.

"I'm not very good at guessing games. Are you Lana Turner?"

"I knew you didn't know me!" she said. "I'm Bertha. I'll have one of your cigarettes, please."

Good old Rainey, that's me. I handed her a crumpled pack, asked, "Bertha who?"

"I knew you didn't know me," she said for the third time and the repetition was as novel as a ticking clock. "I'm Bertha Smathers, 2C across the hall. Mind lighting my cigarette, please?"

I lit the cigarette, stepped back for a better view. With a careless gesture of her hand, she managed to flick ashes around the room. "I'd like a shot from your private bottle of rye, please."

"But I only drink ketchup, Miss Smathers."

"You funny, funny man! But surely you have a bottle of cheap rye stashed in your locked filing cabinet!"

"In my—"

She inhaled deeply, coughed, and damned near lost both lungs. When she got her lungs back into position, she croaked greedily: "Whiskey! Hurry with the whiskey!"

I let the strange words run through my mind, asked casually: "Why should I have any rye in this room?"

Her eyes had watered from the cigarette smoke. "Because all private eyes drink cheap rye."

"So that's what you mean, Miss Smathers. You're a private eye, eh?"

"Of course not."

"May I suggest that you get a good grip on that table?" I said. "Yes, and don't inhale any more smoke. Stop reading Ray Chandler just before you go to sleep. Lay

off Grade-B pictures at the Orpheum. Take the advice of Thomas Ryerson and—"

She purred: "I'd like to be a detective, too, Mr. Rainey."

That's when the floor jumped up and walloped me in the solar plexus. She couldn't know my name. Nobody in this boarding house knew my name. I was Tom Ryerson, Forsythe's law clerk. Some night soon I was going to splice a wire onto Mrs. Merian's telephone line. Or hide a dictograph under the canopied bed where she slept alone, because it was barely possible that she might mumble the name of Danny Kellett's hideout in her sleep. Outside of that my mind was as empty as a tramp's belly.

"Why do you say I'm Mr. Rainey?" I asked, still playing it casual.

"You're a private detective. Haven't you any rye?"

I couldn't believe this. She was at least forty-five years old. Gray hair parted in the middle, fluffed out over her ears. A face as gray and soft as putty. Flat-chested. A blue-colored cotton dress. Cheap rayon stockings and legs as thin as Danny Kellett's honesty. She wore sensible, Cuban-heeled slippers.

I gave up. "How did I give myself away, Miss Smathers?"

"I don't blame you," she said. "I tailed you this morning. I knew you didn't know me!"

"Tell me about it."

She rattled it off. I'd left Merians at eight-twenty-one, walked three blocks up West Plank Road, boarded a Roseville Avenue at eight-thirty-two, rode to Brant Street. At the Brant Street Garage, I'd driven off in a Plymouth sedan, license number—

I interrupted: "I'll take it from there. You checked at the license bureau for my address. You took a bus to Market Street, burgled into my office with a piece of wire and—"

"Not with a piece of wire!"

"Okay, not with a piece of wire. Whom did you tell this to?"

"To you."

Her face was as deceptively angelic as the family cat with the canary in its digestive tract. "I'm really very clever. Nobody knows I play detective. I've followed everybody in this house. That Mr. Edmondson in 2-F keeps a redhead—"

"Some other time. Why am I here?"

Eagerness lighted her putty-like face. "To trace Danny Kellett and recover the stolen money."

OKAY, so I'm a private op and Cramer over at Aircraft had paid me a hundred dollars to make a fool out of myself. That's what come from overconfidence. You figure to put in some time, dig out some hidden details, and you get careless. Maybe I could salvage something from the wreck of my ego.

"Want to help me trace Kellett?"

"I just learned where he is, Mr. Rainey."

"Let's start over again and together. Remember I'm Mr. Ryerson. Where is Kellett?"

"You're in too big a hurry."

I wasn't in any more hurry than a scab-back running for a touchdown. "Where, where?"

"Remember I had to work very hard and think very cleverly to find out his hiding place."

"What did you have to do?"

"You're sure you won't give me a drink of your rye?"

"Believe me, Miss Smathers, that's only done in the B-movies."

Evidently that convinced her that I had no cheap rye stashed on the premises. She pulled the hem of the blue dress over her knobby knees and started to act like a sensible, middle-aged damsel. That was much better. I began to like this old maid who played amateur detective and dreamed of herself, probably, as the blonde bombshell in a murder movie.

"I know everything about everyone in this house," she explained. "When Danny Kellett stole that money, I decided that I would ferret out his hideout. He and his Aunt Margaret are positively infatuated with one another and haven't any time for poor Mr. Merian! I'll bet she loathes that Miss Barbara Nason. The aunt, that is! I reasoned that they would communicate with each other when—when things cooled off. Kellett and Aunt Margaret, I mean. Not by telephone because that is far too obvious. By letters I reasoned."

I listened because I didn't have anything else to do, and besides I'd already wasted four days.

She went on: "I started to check the ten A.M. and two P.M. daily mail deliveries.

That way I could get a peek at all the letters that come to this address. That is, a peek at the envelopes! Last week I realized that letters were coming on Mondays and Thursdays for a Miss Rose Drebing. There will be another one tomorrow in the morning mail if he keeps to the schedule."

"And if it is Danny Kellett who is writing those letters—"

She smiled pityingly at me. "Mr. Ryerson, there's no Rose Drebing at this address. I've seen Danny's handwriting enough to recognize it but that didn't help. No, it was the green ink."

"Green ink?"

"One of his failings. I know George, the mailman, as well as I know my Uncle Jacob from Elmira! I managed to meet George at the corner candy store where I buy my morning and afternoon papers. It was easy to get him to let me scan the envelopes. The writing on the Rose Drebing letters was in green ink!"

"How much for that postmark?"

"You mean how much money will I want for the information?"

"Of course."

Her forehead wrinkled. "No," she decided "To take money would spoil my amateur standing. I'll propose an agreement. Tomorrow morning we'll go off together in your Plymouth. I mean we'll leave here separately and rendezvous at the Brant Street garage; We'll drive to Ha—, to wherever Kellett is hiding."

Excitement crowded into her eyes. They were lovely eyes with no more sex appeal than you find on a potato. "I want to be in on—the kill! I'll pay *you* twenty dollars to take me along!"

"It won't be exciting. It won't be thrilling. But you've earned a free ride to Ha—, to wherever Kellett is. What time, Miss Smathers?"

"Nine o'clock at the garage."

I FINGERED the knob on the corridor door. Maybe I'd suddenly realized how thin that door was. I opened the door noiselessly, peered out. Something whisked around the far corner toward the twin bathrooms. I went that way with quick, silent strides.

Nothing around the corner.

Water dripped from a leaky faucet in one of the bathrooms. A step creaked. Where? I peered at a closed door. I opened it.

Darkness and maybe a faint clicking noise.

Up at the front of the house was a wide stairway that all the roomers used. This door led to the back stairway which Mrs. Merian had warned me was only used by herself or her husband. It led to their rooms on the first floor.

Had Mrs. Merian been listening outside my door? Had she overheard what Bertha Smathers had said? Had Mr. Merian, puttering outside my window, been able to hear Bertha in my room? Had he come upstairs to hear more clearly? Or to tip off his wife who had listened? Here were a lot of questions.

I didn't know. Maybe I only thought that I'd heard a clicking noise like a lock being set on this stairway. I closed the door and went back to my bedroom. The old-maid detective stood by the table fingering one of the law books. "The coast clear?" she whispered. There was a startling brightness in her eyes.

"Yes."

"Nine at the garage. That's so you won't go off without me because I didn't tell you the name of the town where Kellett is. I'm awfully tired, Mr. Ryerson, with all my running around today! Maybe I'd better borrow a sleeping pill for my headache. Have you one?"

"No."

She walked close to me. There were dreams in her eyes and I'd seen wrinkles in her stockings. She whispered: "That horrible woman guzzles vanilla, you nice, nice boy!"

She went out as quietly as a cat sidling over the windowsill. But I would see this character again.

So I would find Danny Kellett tomorrow. Three framed pictures of him at various stages in life hung downstairs in Aunt Margaret's front room. Each bore the inscription, "All my love to you." I hadn't seen the one that said: "Auntie, I'm a fugitive from justice! Help me!"

Mr. Merian, I had learned during my stay, was a red-faced man, probably because he went to Nick's Bar up the street every night and downed a quart of ale. He liked to sit on our front stoop, stockinged feet on the railing, and grunt at the passing roomers.

He liked to sit there because grunting with him was conversation.

Mostly he could be seen perched behind

Lying there so quietly, she looked much younger than her years. It had been an easy way to die.



the wheel of an ancient Model-T coupe. The coupe had balloon-sized tires and looked like a cracker box mounted on four huge doughnuts. But it looked ready to move when it had to.

Neither Merian nor his wife were im-

portant now. Bertha Smathers would lead me to Danny Kellett, the Nason girl, and the money. Money. How much could they spend in two months? Multiply the cash balance by fifteen percent. Let's see, that would be . . .

CHAPTER III

The Trail Is Hot

FOR THE STEENTH time, I strode to the wide open double doors and peered along the street. A couple of pig-tailed girls skipped rope under a starved linden tree. Across the way, a woman wearing a bandanna around her hair shook a mop out a second-story window. It would be another stifling day in the city and the smells off the meadow would curl a pig's snout.

A young man with a grease streak down his left cheek stepped from the tiny side office. He stopped and began to wipe his dirty hands on the sides of a green-colored coverall that sported faded sergeant's stripes on the sleeve.

"Bet she's a stunner, Mr. Ryerson," he said and grinned.

"A natural platinum blonde."

"I like 'em that way. Plenty of curves and no resistance on the straightaways!" He grinned again and there wasn't a worried wrinkle in his entire makeup. "She going to stand you up?"

My eyes flicked over the stripes. "What outfit, son?"

"Patton's. You in?"

"South Pacific."

"Officer?"

"They discovered I had a mind of my own."

"Don't we all. Twice I had chances at O.C.S. What the hell, I figured, you're better off with stripes, kid. By the time you kiss all the bars and stars in the swank clubs and buy them Scotch, you—"

She had promised to meet me at nine o'clock. My wrist watch said it was nine-forty-two. "Do me a favor?" I asked, cutting across the kid's favorite monologue.

"Two of 'em, pal."

We went into the office and I located the number in the phone book. "Call this number and say you're from Western Union. Telegram for Miss Bertha Smathers. One of two persons will answer. A man with a plug of Kingpin tobacco in his mouth or a female with a frog voice. Insist on Miss Smathers."

"The platinum blonde! What's she sound like?"

I thought about that for a moment. "A soft voice, son, with overtones of dreams in it."

He whistled appreciatively. "What's in this telegram?"

"I'll figure a message while you dial."

The clicking of the spinning dial. His eyebrows jumped up and he winked. "Frog voice," he said without using his volume.

Then: "Western Union, ma'am. Telegram for Miss Bertha Smathers. . . . Sorreee! Would you call her, pul-lease?"

He propped the receiver between his left ear and left shoulder and fumbled for a cigarette. "Say, does she use that voice to call the male frogs?"

"Careful," I warned. "She may pull the old dodge of laying down the receiver and picking it up quick."

His lips asked: "You a dick?"

No, I wasn't a dick. I was a very worried guy climbing that wide stairway behind Mrs. Merian. Now I was rapping on the door of 2-C. Waiting, listening for some sound behind the door.

After a while the kid said: "Busy. Keep the line open, pul-lease." He was having more fun than a fat man at a strip tease.

Nine-forty-eight by the watch. She'd had time enough to mount those wide stairs, batter the door in, dress Miss Smathers in long underwear and carry her down to the phone. Suddenly the kid tensed. "What's that again?" He cradled the phone, turned. "Wow, I'm sorry, pal!"

CHILLS had been running up and down my spine. They kept on running like an athlete readying for a race. "What did Mrs. Merian say?"

"The blonde! Something awful happened to her!"

But she'd been so happy last night. Getting such a big kick out of playing detective games. Just a headache coming on because she'd run around so much, tailing me in the hot sun.

"What happened to her?"

"Frog voice croaked something about a bad accident and hung up! Golly, I'm sorry. You want I should—"

"No, never mind."

A man in a gray-blue suit and blue-peaked hat strolled past the front window. He waved one free hand and went about his business of delivering the morning mail. It was ten o'clock.

"Get my car fast!" I shouted, and ran into the main garage.

I arrived at the candy store on West

Plank Road in time to see another mailman disappear inside. I followed him right in, tapped him on the shoulder. "George, any mail for Miss Rose Drebing?"

He was a little man with twinkling eyes. "Don't know you," he said.

I'm a new roomer at Merian's. Bertha Smathers sent me over to see if there was any mail, George. Bertha has been checking the mail for me the past two-three weeks."

"Son, you look kinda worried. What's on your mind?"

"Well, I'm engaged to Rose. We had a lover's quarrel and she ran off by herself. I found out she might be stopping at Merian's but Bertha told me that my girl had moved out. Bertha says it's all right for me to check."

"Did, eh?" He began to leaf through a handful of mail. I spotted the envelope addressed in green ink. "Can't give this to you," George said, "even if you *are* engaged to her."

"That's all right. Any return address?"

"None. Just a postmark and the green ink."

It said "Hallstead" in a curve inside the postmark. I wanted to rip the letter out of his hand and race off but you don't trifle with Uncle Sam. Most of all, I wanted to see what was behind the door of 2-C at Merian's.

"Run out on a handsome guy like you, eh?" George was saying. "Where'd you get that broken nose, eh?"

"I ran into a door. That letter is from a friend of hers and maybe the friend will know where Rose is."

"Good luck," George said cheerfully. "Once I was like you, only I went and got myself married. Seems like a lot of people are getting interested in earlier mail deliveries around here, mister."

I was moving toward the door.

"—feller stopped me on Roseville Avenue and wanted to—"

I was out the door.

AN ambulance stood parked on the wrong side of the street on West Plank Road. Its red light kept winking at me. Three or four kids stared at the shiny vehicle but I had eyes only for the white-coated interne trotting down the front steps.

I moved forward. "How bad, Doc?"

"D.O.A.," he said, and called to the driver: "We're shoving off, Joe! Cops are taking over."

"Cops?" I asked softly.

The interne had close-cropped black hair, black eyes, and a heavy crop of black hair on thick forearms that protruded from the short-sleeved jacket the city provided. "You knew her?" he asked.

"Roomed across the hall. What happened?"

"She must have got tired of it all," he said casually. "You read about it every day in the papers. Overdose of barbiturates but it gets you down when you see 'em the next morning. A woman over on Ferncliff Avenue last week swallowed fifty-seven of those damned pills! You wonder how she—"

"You can tell how many they take?"

His medical eyes withered my ignorance. "What do you think a P. M. is for?"

Just like that, I thought, as the ambulance purred off.

One pill is a dose. You drop off into a deep well lined with purple velvet and emerge eight or ten hours later. Just five grains of the stuff does the trick at first. Then you find that one pill isn't enough. You try two. Then it's three or four.

Pretty soon the stuff doesn't hit you at all. You figure six will drop you down into that blessed, velvet well of sleep. You settle for a handful. But it's a deep well. The sides are slippery. You slip down fast but you can't climb back.

But I didn't like it. Only a person with sawdust for brains does a thing like that. Bertha Smathers had been clever and sensible, except when she'd tried to play blonde bombshell in my bedroom. Maybe the trouble with her was that she'd known where to find Danny Kellett and the Nason girl and a lot of cash.

I went inside. Someone was sobbing in the living-room. A heavy voice croaked: "Maybe it's better, dearie. You and her was friendly but she must have had a lot on her mind and we didn't know about it, dearie. Last night she told me she had a headache. It must have been more than that on her mind, dearie. Don't take on none. You—"

I didn't know who dearie was. I climbed the stairs quietly. The door of 2-C was closed. I had no right to go inside but I went in anyway and closed the door.

The rain-freckled shade was up a foot

at the window. Enough light filtered in so that I could see that the curtains were made from some brightly flowered stuff. Bottles that advertised how a woman could become glamorous in a week littered the bureau top.

A small bottle with a blue-bordered label from Marlow's Drugstore on Plank Road stood with the rest. The date said it had been issued a month back. The typed instructions read, "One (1) capsule at night only," but whatever had been in the bottle was gone.

A lamp with a rose-colored shade stood on a table, along with an empty drinking glass, a Gideon Bible, and a two-dollar edition of Bruno Fischer's latest chiller, "The Pigskin Bag."

She lay in the center of the bed. The sheet had been smoothed over her thin body, the hem doubled across her flat chest. The brow was smooth and untroubled, like a forest pool. Lying there so quietly, she looked much younger than forty-five years. It had been an easy way to meet death.

Her lips were cold to my pressed fingers. I touched her head. Some rigor mortis. I knew enough about death to realize that she'd been dead for hours, that she'd died quietly in her sleep.

To the right of the bed was a straight chair. A green silk dress lay folded across the back. Under that a light summer coat of some soft gray material. Pink things on top of a small, stained cedar chest. A pocketbook, a hat with red flowers, and stockings carefully folded, while on the floor waited a pair of high-heeled slippers.

She was on her way to the casket.

I TIPTOED to the chest and had no trouble opening the pocketbook. A small checkbook with a couple hundred dollars balance in the Ironton National Bank. A purse with a roll of bills and some loose silver. A vanity mirror, lipstick, pack of gum, and a door key on a long metal chain. One folded handkerchief, a fountain pen, and an oustiti.

An oustiti is a burglar's tool used to turn keys that have been left inside the locked doors of a room. Possession of one is illegal. It helped to explain how she might have burgled her way into my office but there was no reason why the police should find it and wonder. I put it into my pocket and crossed to the bureau.

The hall door opened.

The woman was in her fifties. She wore a housedress that must have been sewn from a half dozen old sugar bags. She had black hair streaked with gray, dark eyes, and pointed features. If her features had not been so sharp, she might have been pretty years ago but now she was plain as a peach basket.

"You got no business in here," Mrs. Merian croaked. She used a stubby finger to shove a couple of loose hairpins into her hair.

"She was my friend," I said. "Did you find her like this?"

"Friend or no friend you got no business in here," she said and stepped aside so I could leave. "She was like that when I came up to tell her there was a telegram."

"Was she in the habit of taking sleeping pills?"

"I don't know. You got no business—"

"Did she complain of a headache last night?"

"I told her not to take them pills!"

I got a whiff of something sickishly sweet on her breath and remembered something.

"Make mine vanilla," I said.

"What was that crack?"

Heavy steps on the stairs. A chunky, red-faced man entered the room, followed by a man who looked like his brother. "Police," he said. "You Mrs. Merian?"

"Yes, and this man here is trespassing in this room!"

"Did he touch anything?"

"He was looking around! He could have!"

The chunky plainclothesman said: "Sam, see what's on him."

"You mean," I asked, "that Sam is to search me?"

"Yeah."

"I'm a law student," I objected. "You making a charge?"

"Oh." The chunky cop sneered. "He wants it legal. Take him downstairs, Sam, and bring in the beat cop."

SO I went downstairs to the living-room. "Sit down and don't get no ideas," Sam said genially. "Or do I have to call in the riot squad?"

I didn't want to be searched, not that I thought they'd try it. I didn't want them to find an oustiti on me, or keep me here when I had important work to do. "I'm not going to run away," I said.

Sam left the room, pushed open the

screen door and called, "Hey, Rasmussen, gimme a hand in here!"

It gave me a couple of seconds to cross the room, slam the front door on Sam. The lock clicked. I pulled down the shade on the door, walked to the rear of the house and out by the kitchen door. There was a high board fence barring the way to the next house but it didn't stop me more than five seconds. It was an easy trick to return to the street and drive off in my sedan. . . .

"If we got it," the elderly man with the white mustache chirped, "you can have it. What's on your mind, son?"

He leaned on the prescription counter at the back of Marlow's Drug Store and let his eyes run over me. "This," I said.

I pulled a badge from one pocket, curled my fingers around the edges and flashed it. It said "HONORARY SHERIFF OF COMERTON COUNTY," but it wasn't important that he read it.

"What's on your mind, son?" he repeated as I pocketed the badge.

"The drug book."

He went behind a partition lined with bottles, returned with a dog-eared book. He spread it flat on the counter. "We do it legal here. Who's it?"

"A Miss Bertha Smathers, West Plank Road."

He used brown-stained fingers to leaf the pages. "August third," he chirped. "That help you, son?"

"Is that the only one?"

"Yep."

"Barbiturates?"

"Amytal."

"How many capsules in the prescription?"

"We gotta be careful about that. "Habit-forming, son. I have the doctor's prescription on file. Want to see that?"

"How many capsules?"

"Eight." His mild blue eyes had sharpened. "What's up, son?"

"Just checking, Doc."

He scratched the side of his face. "I'm an accommodating cuss, I am, but ain't you a little out of your territory?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm an accommodating cuss but Comerton County's in South Jersey. Is Bertha all right?"

He had the eyes of a cat, to have glimpsed the lettering on that badge. "She's all right now," I said carefully, and left.

At the sedan I spread a Jersey road map flat across the wheel. The index said 3-B. I ran my finger down the "three" line, crossed that with a line from the "B" in the left-hand margin and hit Hallstead in northwestern New Jersey.

"I'll come back," I told myself bitterly. "Damned right, I'll come back, Bertha!"

I had to move fast. The trail was hot. You bog down fast on a hot trail, sometimes, because the quarry is ready to move.

CHAPTER IV

Rough Night

FROM the top of the ridge, the Flatbrook meandered across the fertile valley. A church stuck its white steeple above a ring of trees like an admonitory finger but it didn't head me off.

The black ribbon of macadam ran straight through the little town of Hallstead, across Flatbrook, and toward the solid stone rampart that marked the Delaware Water Gap on the hazy horizon. I drove the Plymouth slowly into town and past the white church, a half-dozen stores, a postoffice, and sedate, white-painted houses as neat as old men dressed in their Sunday clothes.

At Al's Wayside Garage, I parked and stretched the journey from Newark out of my legs. A young man left the garage and flicked the record of the last purchase off the single gas pump.

"Say when, mister."

"Make it two dollars worth and I won't have to watch."

The whirring of the pump, the stench of high-test gas, and a couple of cars rattling past on the highway. "Not many new cars on the road," I offered.

"I see a few." He pulled the dripping nozzle from the tank, replaced the hose on its hook. "Check the oil and water?"

"No. I'd like to buy byself a brand new Buick sedan."

"You can dream, mister."

"How's the fishing in Flatbrook?"

"Dace and a few bass. Are you on a fishing trip?"

"Sort of." I handed him two one-dollar bills. "But I'd still like to buy a new Buick. Ever see a blue Buick sedan around here?"

He grinned again, a friendly gesture filled with good will. "Hell, just come right

out and ask for what you want, mister. What's bothering you?"

I should have known. Country folk are as open and frank as a sunflower alongside the vegetable garden. "A new, blue Buick sedan. License E-4-8270. A blonde woman with glasses, about thirty-five. A tall man, with black, curly hair, crafty eyes, pointed nose, and a mole under his left ear. Names won't mean a thing."

"What'd they do?"

"Ran off together."

"Are you the husband?"

"Could be."

"I don't make the Buick. Sure it's in this neck of the woods?"

A fire siren wailed down the street. "Noon, is all," he said. "Sorry about the Buick."

"Where do you find any night life near here?"

"Some at Crystal Lake and the rest is at Fred's Log Cabin toward the Gap on Route 208."

So I thanked him and drove past ripening fields, fat barns, lean houses and woods. Then a long, one-story building with faded green shingles and imitation log siding. Red-painted screens at the windows and doors, flower boxes alive with red geraniums.

I parked alongside a battered touring car with the top down and went inside. Tables with red-and-white checkered cloths ringed a dance floor. The wire-backed chairs were as empty as a chorus girl's smile. A lighted juke box was letting Perry Como unload a nickel's worth of "Prisoner of Love."

A fat-stomached, bald-headed man with a white shirt, black bow tie and white apron stood behind the long bar. He leaned his stomach against the drainboard and worried his teeth with a frayed toothpick.

At the far end of the bar, a blonde folded paper napkins and gave me the eye. A huge, shirt-sleeved man with hairy forearms and an ugly face had his chin dangling a couple of inches above a beer glass.

I sat down on a high stool. The bartender's eyebrows arched a question but he didn't move or say anything.

"A little lemon," I ordered, "in a cold glass of soda."

Perry Como gave up on love's prisoner and it got so quiet I could hear thoughts rattling around inside my head.

"Did you say a cold glass of soda with

lemon," the bartender asked slowly, "or a glass of cold soda with lemon?"

I'd met a grammarian behind a country bar. "Cold soda with lemon," I said, correcting the order.

"Sure. Say, do you want I should squeeze the lemon in the soda or just drop a slice in the glass?"

"A slice will do it nicely."

Hairy arms tittered. I eyed him curiously. He had a face like a box stall that had been gnawed by rats.

"Won't that make it a little too strong for you?" the bartender continued solicitously. "Maybe I should just sorta wave the slice of lemon over the soda, huh?"

Hairy arms banged a fist on the bar. The beer glass jumped. He roared with laughter and the back of my neck got red and hot. A vein on the left side of my face started to pulse.

"Say, we got lots of other queer drinks," the bartender went on. "What about our tutti-frutti coke special, huh?"

"The soda and lemon."

"Hey, maybe you want a glass of water with the bar rag in it!"

IT WAS too much for hairy arms. He almost choked with laughter. When he got his breath back, he croaked: "You're a card, Fred! The—the bar rag in it! That's a good drink for a boob!"

The word hit me like a slap. I'm a quiet guy who doesn't mind chasing a couple of thieves. I don't go around looking for trouble. Or back away from it. Maybe business was slow and they liked to fill in the time. Or they could be a pair of refugees from a Fred Allen broadcast.

The vein on the side of my face throbbed like a hose line at a three-alarm fire. The blonde had her chin cupped in one hand. I slid off the stool, walked over to hairy arms. He looked tough. He looked as if he was half as tough as he thought he was.

"What did you say I was?" I asked and my voice had a tense, flat sound in my own ears.

He sneered. "I said you was a boob."

"That's what I thought you said."

He opened his arms as he turned on the stool. He fluttered the arms up and down like a butterfly.

"Is 'oo a boob?" he cooed.

I grabbed a handful of shirt. He came off the stool and the blonde screamed, "No!"

It was too late. Hairy arms brought a hay-maker up from the floor. I jerked and the front half of his shirt came off. It was enough to spoil his aim and his fist slid past.

He whirled. He was as wide open as a hay-barn door. I clipped him with a stiff left to the chin, then stepped in and punched a right to the midriff. That jarred his spine. His eyes glazed. He slumped down on the floor like an ugly rag doll.

"Did you say I was a boob?" I asked.

"Look out!" the blonde shrilled and I whirled around.

Fred had slid around from behind the bar. He had an empty soda bottle cocked over his head. As I turned he backed up a couple of steps and tried to hide the bottle behind a mote of dust that floated in the air. "Just gonna clear off a table," he mumbled.

Black spots danced before my eyes. The blonde called: "Cut it, big boy! Come sit with me!"

They were a pair of wise guys. They owned this part of the state. And I had to walk in on it and get myself tangled up. For a lousy hundred dollars of Aircraft's money!

FRED ran behind the bar. I could still take him but the fever was burning out of my blood. I walked past Hairy Arms who had his hands clasped over his stomach and sat by the blonde.

"You burn up fast," she said and patted my arm.

"Yeah, and I always think I'm as big as the other fellow. This time I was right. Who the hell do they think they are?"

"Whoever they thought they are, they aren't." Her left hand inched up my arm. The fingers played with the biceps. She had nice blue eyes, cool and direct. The thin shirtwaist above the short apron was filled out too satisfactorily for just rustic eyes.

"Things get rough in here some nights," she was saying. "That's the bouncer on the floor. You want his job?"

"Skip it."

"But you throw a neat punch, big boy."

"Some things I don't do so good, honey."

I eased a ten-dollar bill from my vest pocket and slipped it into the apron pocket where she stowed her tips. "Suppose you and I talk. I want a peek at a blue Buick sedan, new and not local, honey."



The high board fence barring the exit didn't stop me more than five seconds.

She thought that over a moment. "Do you want the blonde that comes in the Buick?"

"I'll take her too."

"What about the tall, black-haired fellow?"

She had me going. "Him, too."

"If you find him, you'll clip him like you did the bouncer?"

"Anything you say."

"It's a deal. I don't like him. You might try Crystal Lake, the east shore, last cottage in."

Then she called down the bar to Fred, "Mix me a drink! A glass of cold soda with two ice cubes and a small slice of lemon."

"You got your nerve!" he growled, but he began to make motions behind the bar and the delayed drink came up directly.

She shoved it in front of me. "Don't mind Fred. He worked until two and his ulcers keep him awake."

"That's an easy way to have rough nights, honey."

I washed a bale of cotton from my mouth with the drink. I set the glass on the bar, asked, "Will you get into trouble for this?"

"I own the joint. Fred is the husband."

"Then I'm sorry about the trouble."

"No trouble at all." She pulled the ten-dollar bill from the apron, stuck it into my vest pocket. She had a smile as warm as the July moon. "I always pay my way into the fights, big boy."

HAIRY arms climbed up off the floor and clung to the bar. "You," the blonde ordered, "say how-do-you-do to the gentleman!"

Hairy Arms grunted "howyado" and his eyes tried to punch me on the chin. I slid off the bar stool, patted the blonde's arm. "I got to shove off. Next time I'm through here, I'll be seeing you."

"Any time." Her eyes had turned as gloomy as a November rainy day. "You don't know how bored I get listening to those two and the drunks every night!"

I could imagine. I crossed the dance floor and Fred snapped: "Honey! Who does he think he—"

"At ease, Junior," the blonde said carelessly. "The next time a stranger comes in here, maybe you'll keep your mouth buttoned."

My Plymouth was still rubbing fenders with the roadster. "Hi, Danny boy," I thought and drove off.

CHAPTER V

Great Big Men

GREAT thunderheads had moved in from the north to obscure the early afternoon sun. From the ridge where I had parked the Plymouth, I could see into the narrow valley. Someone had flung a dirt dam topped with stone slabs across the valley's neck and backed up a mile of sparkling blue water.

On the west shore cottages rubbed elbows in plentiful orderliness. Piers jutted into the water. Rowboats and a couple of sailboats rode at anchor like fat men floating. Three speedboats were playing a game of follow-my-wake. The noise killed every other sound.

The east shore was a rough, hilly wilderness. A narrow dirt road hugged the shoreline and passed a few scattered cottages half-buried within the pine woods. Behind these cottages the ground sloped upward sharply to a ridge that paralleled the lake. Back of this ridge ran a second road, only it was smooth macadam. Maybe it continued on around Crystal Lake or perhaps it ran off by itself until it crossed the New York State line.

Shortly after two o'clock I headed the Plymouth into the dirt road. I passed exactly nine houses, then approached a thick stretch of white pine that crowded down to the shoreline. The road ended abruptly where a granite headland pushed into the lake. I parked and got out.

The blonde at the Log Cabin had said, "East shore, the last cottage in." Had I passed the last cottage? Should I turn the car around or walk back?

It was cool under the pines, quiet except for the rumble of the speedboats. I walked forward a few feet toward the headland and that's how I spotted the cottage tucked within the pines. It stood a hundred feet back from the shore and had a roof that sloped from east to west and a fieldstone chimney. I skirted a clump of briars and saw a single, doorless garage.

Parked inside was a dust-covered, blue sedan with the word Buick on a metal plate attached to the luggage compartment. The license plate said H-987-A but that could mean that Danny Kellett had had the foresight to steal those license plates before he had purchased the Buick and run off with

Aircraft's twenty-six thousand dollars. At the nearness of Danny Kellett, my heart started to thud against my ribs.

There wasn't any point in checking the sedan, nor in hanging around to raise suspicion in anybody's mind. Neither Kellett nor the Nason girl had ever heard of Steven J. Rainey, Private Investigations. It seemed like a good idea to find out who was home in the cottage, so I cooked up a stall about making a postal survey of Crystal Lake's summer residents.

If they were watching, they would see me approach. If they didn't see me coming, they certainly couldn't hear me with the speedboats making all that racket. The echoes bounced off the still water like the continuous rattle of small-arms fire.

The faint trail wound through pristine pine to where the cottage lurked near the base of the steep ridge. It was a one-story affair as substantial as a liar's promise. A screened porch was attached to the front end. The galvanized wire had rusted through in spots and in one hole, someone had stuffed an old newspaper to outwit Jersey's famous mosquitoes.

With the sun behind the thunderheads, it was like twilight under the pines. I rapped lightly on the door casing and waited.

Two windows with dark green shades drawn down opened off the porch. The porch itself held a table, two straight chairs and an iron swing littered with crumpled pillows and a pad. A half-filled bottle of Four Roses, two empty ones, four stained glasses, a table lamp with a kewpie doll on the shade, and a box of Crax cluttered the top of the wobbly legged table.

I knocked a second time, not expecting any answer if the whiskey bottles meant that the occupants were sleeping off an all-night binge. With time on my hands, I began to look around. To the right the faint outline of a path headed toward the corner of the cottage and disappeared. On impulse I went that way.

IT WAS gloomier beneath the interlaced branches overhead. A window in the sidewall was shut tight, the shade drawn. A cardboard box filled with empty beer bottles waited forlornly against the sidewall for someone to transport them to the liquor store in exchange for glass nickels. My feet made not the slightest noise on the thick carpet of dead pine needles.

The racket of the speedboats slackened as the pilots fled down the lake. At the rear of the cottage, I leaned against the three-foot bole of a grandfather pine. The path continued on, climbed slightly in a twisting course to avoid more trees, and ended at a small building about four foot square. It had a weathered shingle roof, shiplap siding, and a closed door in which someone had carved a half-moon.

Something thumped inside the outhouse. The door moved outward slightly. I withdrew my head and peered around the trunk. The door opened. A tall man who wore only a pair of shorts stepped outside.

He stopped. He was in the middle of a prodigious yawn when something made a single, spiteful crack in the silence.

His mouth snapped shut. His left hand jerked to the side of his face. Without a sound he pitched forward and landed face down on the path. I leaned further around the trunk.

Blue-gray smoke detached itself from a trunk a dozen feet from the fallen man and drifted toward the outhouse. A chunky man wearing a slouch hat and dark clothes moved uphill swiftly. In the half light he was an indistinct blob.

"Hey!" I shouted, always ready to do the wrong thing at the right time.

The man whirled, jumped behind a trunk. Maybe he saw me. Maybe he guessed where I was hidden. The muzzle of a rifle pointed out from behind the tree. I jerked back. *Crack!*

There was no mistaking the sound of this second shot. It was a .22. In the hands of a marksman, a .22 is a deadly weapon. You can get yourself killed with a .22. One shot had stopped the tall man in his tracks as if he'd been conked with a sledge hammer.

I peered around the opposite side of the sheltering trunk. The chunky man was legging it uphill, dodging behind more trees, darting an occasional glance back over one shoulder. I could have overtaken him easily but there was a drawback to pursuit.

I didn't have a gun on me. There was a loaded .38 revolver in the Plymouth back on the road but it might just have well been in a Newark safe deposit box. I did want a closer glimpse of this killer and a look at the tall man on the path.

I jumped behind another tree and found that the outhouse was now between me and the chunky man. In a dozen strides, I

reached the fallen man and knelt down. He had black, curly hair and pointed features. If I needed any further identification, there was a mole the size of a dime under his left ear.

Danny Kellett had come to the end of his crooked trail. He didn't have to worry any longer about dodging police. A neat round hole had punctured the side of his left temple. The wound had not bled very much, indicating that the single shot from the .22 had killed him almost instantly.

NO ONE had to draw a map to tell me what had happened previous to my arrival. The chunky man had been in wait near the outhouse, knowing that Danny Kellett would be there when he awakened. While Kellett had been inside, the killer had gotten into position to bushwhack Kellett.

"Why?" I thought, and waited for an answer that did not come.

I rounded the outhouse cautiously and set out after the killer because I have always been too thick-headed. If I went back for the .38, the killer would escape. If I continued on up the hill, I could get a bullet in me.

The stand of pine helped some, because I could use the trunks for shelter. Halfway up the slope, I spotted the hurrying figure, dim in the half-light. He was still a stranger but still as deadly with that rifle in his hands. He must have glimpsed me because the rifle jumped to his shoulder. Flame stabbed the day.

There was the quick, hard rap of .22 ammunition. The bullet high overhead sounded like a 16-inch shell. I didn't sprint forward and wrest the rifle from his hands. He disappeared behind another trunk and I caught glimpses of one elbow working back and forth as he moved upward.

"Go back to Cramer at Aircraft," I thought, "and hand him the hundred bucks. Yeah, while you're in one piece. This is a job for the army, not an unarmed dope."

So I followed him as if the place were filled with booby traps. He gained steadily until he came to a ledge of rock. Again he whirled and snapped a shot. Wild, but the warning was there. He swung off to the right, climbed the ledge and disappeared.

I slid to the left. I had to be more careful because it would be easy for a marksman to hide on the ledge and pick me off

as I approached. Short spurts carried me upward from the protection of one trunk to another. My eyes strained to sight the chunky man on the ledge. I gasped for breath, and sweat streamed off my body.

He could be hiding on the ledge. He could have swung off to the right. Or to the left and outflank me. So I dallied and fiddled and worked closer to the ledge. Mostly I lost time. I'd seen too many men bushwhacked by snipers in the South Pacific.

Then an engine started up beyond the ledge. That last shot might mean a warning for me to slow up and wait. He could have used the time to rush down the far side of the ridge and reach the macadam road where he had a car parked.

I raced upward, scaled the ledge and crossed the brief summit. No chunky man. A hundred yards almost straight down lay the macadam road. An engine throbbed south toward where the road curled around the dirt damsite but I couldn't see that way nor glimpse the car.

There was a slim chance that I might be able to reach the Plymouth and overhaul him by the dam, rifle or no rifle. I sprinted downhill. Danny Kellett hadn't moved from the path. The cottage might have been a morgue. Was the Nason girl dead inside?

I rushed toward the garage that stabled the Buick. A car started up on the dirt road. It was a battered roadster with the top down. It left a plume of dust behind it. There was something familiar about that roadster, something more familiar about the big man hunched over the wheel.

Then he turned, saw me running. He thumbed his nose and stepped on the gas. It was Hairy Arms, the bouncer I'd floored at Fred's Log Cabin. Evidently he had overheard the directions the blonde had given me. Had he come out here to warn Danny Kellett? Had he just been tailing me, maybe with revenge in his mind?

I climbed into the Plymouth, stepped on the self-starter. It set up a whirring racket but the engine did not catch. Yes, the ignition was on. Yes, I'd fed it gas. Yes, the battery had plenty of life. The engine didn't even cough once.

I JUMPED out. The catches on one side of the hood were loosened. I picked up the hood. Sure, I could have stepped on the starter until the battery died but the engine wouldn't have roared. Hairy Arms

had yanked the ignition wires loose from the distributor head. The wires, fortunately, were of different lengths so that I could replace them but that took me five minutes.

Meanwhile Hairy Arms was halfway back to the Log Cabin or to the hole where he lived. Danny Kellett's killer had long since passed the dam and headed from the valley. I was a smart detective, all right. I had a quick temper that had made me toss a couple of silly punches into a dope and a killer had escaped.

At the next cottage, a young woman answered my knock. She wore a bandanna over blonde curls held in place by bobby pins. A thin, silk shirtwaist was glued against her. Abbreviated, jade-colored shorts were as tight on her hips as the skin over an orange. The legs were tanned, too well-rounded to be wasted on this wilderness.

She must have been bored. Her eyes lighted up when she saw me. "Yes?" she asked and smiled.

"There's been a bad accident," I said. "May I use the phone?"

The eagerness died in her eyes and she said casually: "You want to call a doctor?"

"The sheriff and coroner."

That widened her eyes and she stepped inside and indicated a phone. "Not a drowning?"

"A killing. The man who owned the Buick."

"Not Johnny Drebinger!"

"If that's his name."

The operator connected me with the sheriff, a slow-talking man with the quaint name of Jonathan Baggs. Oh, yes, he knew exactly where the cottage was. Marcus Trouts owned it. Fact, he'd been born on the lake and knew every inch of the ground. Sure, he could come right out as soon as he picked up a deputy and notified the coroner. Maybe twenty minutes. There was a lot more to it than that but there wasn't any sense recording the details.

I cradled the phone. The well-stacked blonde looked as if someone had conked her with a tack hammer. She had the cork out of a bottle of rye. Her hands were trembling so much that she couldn't pour the stuff into a glass tumbler. I took the bottle from her and her hand was as cold as iced beer.

"Say when," I said and let the rye gurgle into the tumbler.

Maybe she wasn't watching me. The tumbler was half full when she said, "When." She downed it neat, every drop of it, then the glass slipped from her hand. She shuddered a couple of times but that could be from shock or the rye.

"We . . . we were there last night . . . late," she managed to get out. "M-my husband and me! You're sure Johnny is—"

"I saw too many dead men in the South Pacific, honey. Was his blonde friend there too?"

"Mrs. Drebinger, yes!"

"How long have you known the Drebingers?"

SHE gulped. Red spots burned on her pale cheeks. She blinked and her head wagged from side to side. That wasn't shock. She had a hangover and an empty stomach and four ounces of 85-proof rye had just hit her brain centers.

"Let's see," she mumbled, her eyes glazing over. "Uh, seven weeks. Maybe a day or two more."

"Drebinger and the blonde came here together?"

"Huh?"

"Did they come to the cottage together?"

"Hey, you're two now!" she said and giggled. "Stand still, you great big man!"

The rye hit her like an earthquake. Soundlessly her mouth dropped open and her eyes closed. She fell forward and I grabbed her to keep her from smacking the floor. She was asleep when I laid her out on the divan, and as defenseless as a stumble-bum tagged with Joe Louis' left jab. I got out of there fast.

The speedboats were playing tag offshore, or whatever it is that summer people do with speedboats at a lake resort. It seemed deathly hushed under the white pines. Hushed and deadly and brain-numbing on a summer afternoon.

Not that I minded too much what had happened to Danny Kellett back by the out-house. I wasn't even thinking about the destiny of the Nason blonde in the silent cottage. She could be dead, too. No, it was a thin, old maid back in Newark, an old maid lying in the morgue, waiting for a relative from Elmira to come along and claim her.

Her death had been a careless calamity.

CHAPTER VI

A New Trick

THE coroner stood up and brushed some of the pine needles off his trousers. "Deader'n Hallstead on Sunday night," he announced.

"How long dead?" Sheriff Baggs drawled.

He was a big man in rumpled gray suit. He had both hands on his hips, the coat drawn back to display his paunch and the butt of a .45 in a holster over his right hip. You could see the starred badge pinned on a frayed white shirt. But his eyes were all right. Black and keen as the wind off ice.

His deputy, a big fellow named Ackersmith, stared at the body while his fingers worked nervously. He needed a hay fork in his gnarled hands for him to be at ease.

How long had Kellett been dead? "I phoned at three-fifteen," I explained. "That would make the time of death about three-five."

Baggs rocked back on his heels. The black eyes cut into me. "You knew this Drebiner?" he wanted to know.

"I told you his right name is Danny Kellett, that he lived on West Plank Road in Newark. He and a blonde number named Barbara Nason are wanted for a twenty-six thousand dollar theft at Aircraft two months back. They've been holed up in the cottage for seven weeks."

"Where's the blonde?"

"If she's in the cabin, she must be sleeping off a drunk or—" I couldn't keep the idea off my lips. "Or dead."

Baggs nodded toward the cabin. Ackersmith padded to the closed back door. He lowered his shoulders, shoved forward suddenly and hit that door like a Notre Dame fullback after a yard of Army's territory. The door splintered. I could have told him it had been unlocked but I didn't want to get involved any deeper.

Twice Ackersmith kicked the door with heavy farm brogans. It crashed to the floor and he stormed in over it. Somebody let out a shriek.

"She ain't drunk," Baggs said drily, "and she ain't dead either. So you saw this Kellett feller killed, heh? So you're Steven J. Rainey, a private detective, hired by Aircraft to recover the money and catch the thieves, eh? Why didn't you come to me

first? This is my territory and I don't like outsiders barging in unannounced."

It was a good question. "I wasn't too sure Kellett was here, Sheriff."

"Any reason why I can't think you was after the cash, that you killed Kellett and then phoned for me?"

"A sheriff can think anything in his own country. Do you want to give me a nitrate test?"

"That's to find out if you fired a gun, ain't it?" Baggs turned to the coroner. "Doc, do you want anything else?"

"I want to get over to the hospital and see how Ann'e Cleary is doing. She's due again and the last time it was twins. Whoever killed this fellow was a good shot."

"How long's he been dead?"

"Say he could of died at three o'clock or thereabouts."

"You gonna send out for the body?"

"That's my job."

He moved off. When he had rounded the cottage, the sheriff said: "Shove off, Rainey."

I TOOK TWO steps toward the cottage. Something hard rammed into my spine and I jumped a foot straight into the air.

"Gun," the sheriff said. "A .45 and I can wing a pheasant with it. You gonna take it easy, Rainey?"

"I'm going to take it very easy."

"You the fellow who caused the ruckus at the Log Cabin about an hour ago, Rainey?"

"I hit that bouncer a couple of times."

"Too bad. Fred swore out a warrant for you. Says you hit the bouncer with a black-jack." A hand ran over my body. Fingers plucked my .38 revolver from the side pocket. "Loaded, but you could of fired once and reloaded."

"The shot that killed Kellett was a .22."

"Well, maybe you got a .22 hid somewhere or you tossed it into the lake and we have to fish it out. Got a permit to lug this gun around when you're out killing folks, Rainey?"

"In my billfold."

Time passed, enough for him to fish out the billfold and return it. "Relax!" he ordered and chuckled. "Took the trouble to take your keys from the Plymouth, Rainey, and locked the ignition. You can run off on shanks mare but you won't run far. Let's see what the blonde says."

I stumbled down the path. He was a hick, all right, about as dumb as a fox with fourteen hounds on its trail.

The tiny front room reeked with stale tobacco smoke, hangovers, and a touch of panic. The blonde sprawled limply on a divan. Her eyes were two black holes in a white mask.

"Mrs. Drebinger?" Baggs drawled.

She nodded. Her kind are trained to await for authority to speak.

"You heard about, uh—Mr. Drebinger?"

Her tongue came out and washed her lips. "He told me," she said and her eyes indicated Ackersmith.

"Know who killed him, Mrs. Drebinger?"

"N-no."

"See anyone prowling around, eh?"

"I . . . I was asleep! I . . . I was tired out!"

"Two empty liquor bottles on the porch," Ackersmith cut in. "And one half-filled. Was good, too, but not as good as apple liquor."

"Know this fellow?" Baggs asked the blonde, after pointing at me.

Her eyes flicked over me but there was no more perception on her face than you can find on a green tomato. "No."

"Place a name like Rainey, Steven J. Rainey?"

"No."

"How long was you married, Mrs. Drebinger?"

He was giving her rope. Panic flicked on and off in her eyes. "I—we—we weren't married."

Baggs clucked his tongue reprovingly. "How long did you know this Drebinger feller, eh?"

"Since . . . since we came here. We . . . we was going to be married, honest! Soon as Johnny got enough money together. And a job!"

There wasn't any sense kicking it around even if this was Sheriff Baggs' territory. She had blonde hair. Green eyes and a narrow face. There was no indentation on the bridge of her nose to indicate that she had ever worn glasses. Finally, she wasn't a day over twenty-five.

"His real name is Danny Kellett," I cut in. "What's yours?"

"June Warnick. Johnny's real name was Kellett?"

"Yeah. Where you from?" I took it up now.

...and such dreams
could buy a lot of
tombstones, I knew.



"Allentown."

"Where'd you meet Kellett?"

"On the highway."

"A pickup?" I asked.

"No!" she flared. "I was waiting for a bus to Allentown and he come along in a new Buick. He stopped and I didn't have to take a bus."

"When was that? I mean how many weeks back?"

"Before we came here."

"How many weeks?"

"Could have been—" And her eyes sharpened.

"Did he bring you right here to this cabin? Did he have it rented before you came here?"

"We came right here, if that means he rented the cabin."

"You're on a spot, sister. With Kellett dead it could mean that one of your boy friends killed him."

"Like hell!" she shrilled. "You don't frame me, copper!"

I turned to Baggs. "She can't be that dumb. Kellett must have ditched the Nason girl and picked this up. Maybe we should tear the dump apart."

"Think the money is here, Rainey?"

The blonde came alive. "How much money?"

"How much did he show you?" I asked.

"I—a roll of bills. Not much."

"How much?"

"Tops is five or six hundred."

"I'm wondering what happened to the Nason girl," Baggs said.

I'd been wondering about that ever since I entered the cabin. I'm not the deductive type. I blunder around, play up the angles, take what I find, and suddenly an answer pops into my brain the way you hit the jackpot on a one-armed bandit. Maybe it's the intuitive instinct of the Irish but detectives call it hunches. I had a hunch.

"Kellett," I explained, "couldn't touch the twenty-six grand without the help of the Nason girl, Sheriff. He used her. They were last seen in Newark the afternoon of the robbery when they bought the Buick. I picked up the trail yesterday. Barbara Nason is thirty-five years old and not as good-looking as this Allentown dame. Twenty-six grand is a lot of money to split two ways."

"You think—" Baggs paused delicately.

"Kellett bumped her off."

That was when the Allentown blonde decided to screech. We didn't jump through the roof but we did jump.

"Get her out of here!" Baggs roared.

Ackersmith gulped and followed the blonde into the single bedroom. A couple of minutes later the two came out. She carried a battered overnight bag?

"What'd she cram in the bag?" Baggs asked.

"Duds," Ackersmith said.

The blonde snapped, "When do I scam?"

"You don't!" Baggs ordered. "Sit down."

WE TOOK the cottage apart. Later, Baggs said: "Four hundred and twenty-one dollars in Kellett's roll, not counting the change. What happened to the rest, Rainey?"

"Let's try the Buick."

The blonde picked up the bag. She acted as if she knew where the next stop would be. We went down the winding path to the sheriff's car. "Leave her with the matron," Baggs said, "and send the prosecutor out here before he has a fit."

"You got nothing on me!" the blonde shrilled. "You can't—"

"Make it vagrancy," Baggs continued.

They drove off and we shoved the Buick outside. Keys that had been in the cottage unlocked the luggage compartment. The only item of interest was a Jersey plate numbered E-4-8270 and that put Danny Kellett in the dumb-dead class.

We ripped out the rear seat, rifled the side pockets, pulled the mat off the floor. Baggs pocketed a new Roosevelt dime. That labelled him a penny-grafter. I was satisfied with the large-sized, black hairpin I'd found on the floor.

That left the front seat, the inside of the motor, and the garage. Nothing in the glove compartment and nothing under the front cushion.

The mat on the floor looked as if it hadn't been cleaned since Kellett had purchased the car in Newark. I pawed around in the debris and unearthed chewing-gum wrappers and burned match sticks and loose cellophane from cigarette packages, and managed to cut a finger.

I used a match stick to rake out the stuff after that and that's how I found the piece of glass that had drawn blood. It was triangular-shaped, slightly concave.

"Mean anything?" Baggs asked curiously.

"Barbara Nason wore glasses."

He nodded solemnly, pulled an envelope from one pocket and carefully filed the glass away. "I'd better get the State Police on the case. They got a technician what can test things and see if this piece of glass came from eye glasses. What about that

stain on the front seat? Figure that's blood, Rainey?"

"It could be her blood if Kellett killed her on the front seat."

"Anything else on your mind?"

Sure, but I didn't tell him. Who had bothered to kill Kellett if he only had a few hundred dollars? Where was Barbara Nason, dead or alive? I had some hunches about that.

Then the rest of the money. You can't keep fifteen percent, my reward, of twenty-odd grand out of your figuring. Somebody still had a lot of Aircraft's cash.

Lastly I couldn't forget the amateur detective, Bertha Smathers. Not for a moment did I believe that she had died by her own hand. That meant the trail led back to Newark.

"The killer," I said, "had a car parked back of the ridge. Let's take a look."

We went in the Plymouth.

As the car paralleled the ridge, Baggs alternately scanned the roadside and the back of the ridge. "Here!" he ordered presently and I parked the car on the shoulder and we got out.

"I'll take it because I know country signs," he decided, and bending over from the hips, he began a meticulous study of the left side of the road. Presently he grunted in satisfaction, stopped on a grassy plot off the road, and pointed at the ground.

"Parked here, he did. See the tire marks? Guess the State Police'll know the make of the tires from the prints."

A section of tire had pressed into the soft black earth, a wide-sized make. Along the outside were raised marks in the form of crude sevens. The center had a broad band of rubber bordered by two uninterrupted, scalloped lines.

"I'm old-fashioned," Baggs offered. "Mostly I get the feel of all the people in a case and then I know my killer. Yes, sir, caught me three murderers that way! Take these young troopers. They got more doodads than a sideshow. They come along with their 'scopes and plaster and they get the evidence, but I get the killer. One time I—"

"What about the trampled grass?"

"Oh, that. He stood around and waited about fifteen minutes. Grass is broken down and stained brownish green which would make it maybe three hours back. Too

bad there's no shoe prints but maybe the troopers can find marks where the killer climbed the slope."

I'd been using by eyes, too. "Maybe we won't need that, Sheriff."

"You got something?"

I pointed at the grass five feet from where the killer had trampled the blades down. "He was careless."

"Why, he was chewing tobacco!"

The killer chewed tobacco. The tires on his car were out-sized. "The murder took place in your county," I said. "You want to get rid of it fast or start in on a bottle of aspirin?"

"Never took aspirin in my life. Fact, I never had a headache."

"Suppose we take a little trip."

"Depends on where we're going, Rainey."

"We can reach Newark in a couple of hours."

"You know who it was that killed this Kellett?"

"Yes."

"Hell's bells," Baggs drawled and moved toward the car. "What you waiting for—another murder?"

The more I thought about it—Bertha Smathers, then Kellett—the more sure I was that the sheriff had asked the right question. As we drove off, I asked casually: "What about that warrant?"

"The one for assaulting Fred's bouncer, eh?"

"It could be tough on me."

"Forget it. The warrant is made out for John Doe and you're Steve Rainey. Besides, why didn't you hit him harder?"

CHAPTER VII

Killer Gets The Drop

NIGHT HAD LOWERED over the city. The dwellers in the ant hills had spumed forth. Shirt-sleeved young men with women on their arms strolled past. The street rang with the glad shouts of frolicking children who should have been in bed. The porches and front steps were laden with people who wanted a breath of what city folks call fresh air.

Buses hammered past on West Plank Road. Cars weaved in and out of the traffic, the headlights swiveling fingers over the shifting scene. Lamp posts wore halos of yellowish light.

Detective Jim Dalgren parked the police car alongside a sign that warned all parkers—NO PARKING. The sign didn't tell us to move on as we got out. Sheriff Baggs took a whiff of air and asked curiously: "What's all the stink?"

"Dumps burning on the meadows," I told him.

"Burning eternally," Jim added and sniffed like a beagle trying to pick up a faint scent on the busy street.

"Hope to see some good work," Baggs went on. "Always willing to learn a new trick, but mostly I'm an old dog."

"Steve," Jim said, "I got that P.M. report on Bertha Smathers. She swallowed fourteen pills, enough to kill a mule."

"Suicide on the books?"

He shrugged. "So far. You think he's in there?"

"It's nine o'clock and he should be halfway through that quart of ale."

The neon-lighted front of a building said Nick's Tavern. We went along the street, eyeing the parked cars. The fourth car in on a dim side street was a model-T coupe with tires that made the car look like a cracker box mounted on four king-sized doughnuts.

"Got a flash?" I asked.

A cone of light jumped from Jim's hand. We bent down to study the tread. Baggs said: "You had the right hunch, Rainey. See those large sevens on the outside? Yep, like those in the soft dirt behind the ridge. I don't need the troopers to tell me that."

He borrowed the flash. Light splashed on the metal body. He ran fingers lightly over the metal and studied the fingers. "Like to bet that dust has got the feel of my county."

"Send some samples," Jim suggested, "and our technicians will make a comparison test."

"Old man Merian," Baggs decided, "must have sure hated that nephew of his'n."

"Or he loved the feel of cash," Jim said drily.

A little man with a busy manner trotted up and rasped: "You fellows get the hell away from that car! You want I should call the beat cop?"

"Call him," Jim snapped, "and let him see if he can beat the hell out of the three of us!"

The little man trotted off. "If he thinks we're car thieves," Baggs said with a

chuckle, "we should oughta steal this rattletrap."

"What about Barbara Nason?" Jim asked me. "Still think she got hers?"

"Positive."

Baggs whistled. "You city fellers do things up brown. Counting that Smathers woman, that would make three corpses. We don't get that many in our county in a year."

"We've more people," Jim explained.

The busy little man trotted up, towing a puffing policeman. "What's going on?" the cop asked. He saw Jim Dalgren. "Hey, you're the dick what solved that gangster murder!"

"Guard this car!" Jim ordered. "I'm sending some of the boys to pick it up."

The disgruntled little man wandered off. We went back to Nick's Tavern. "You go in and finger him, Steve," Jim decided. "Maybe the three of us can take him without calling out the reserves."

Baggs chuckled and I entered the tavern. I didn't have a gun because Baggs had taken it from my pocket. There didn't seem to be any reason why Merian would plug me in the stomach with a .22 rifle.

A JUKE BOX blared in one corner. Couples danced limply. The place was permeated with the odors of stale beer, sweat, and untidy romance.

Merian sat at the back, a tall green bottle of Ballantine's ale in front of him. I edged alongside of him. "Hot tonight," I offered and grinned.

He glanced up, recognition flitted into his eyes and he grunted. He had the conversational habits of a beer mug. Jim moved in on Merian's left. When he was in position, I shoved against Merian and pinioned his right elbow. We took him as easily as a cat spearing fish out of a saucer. "Outside, and quietly," Jim said.

Merian slid off the stool. We walked in a tight group through the tavern. At the curb the sheriff got into the back, Merian followed him, and I got in last. Jim sat on the front seat, turned and laid one arm on the cushion.

"Want to tell us about it?" Jim suggested. "Remember I'm warning you that I'll use whatever you say against you."

Merian grunted.

"He doesn't talk," I reminded Jim. "Grunts and shoots."

"He's a crack shot with a .22. Merian, did you take a long trip up-state today?"

That rated another grunt.

"Did you know all along that Danny Kellett had been hiding at Crystal Lake near Hallstead?"

No grunt.

"Why'd you shoot your nephew, Merian?"

Jim should have been talking to a lamp post. He wiped sweat off his face, went on easily: "We'll find the rifle, Merian. The dust on your car checks with the dust around Crystal Lake. Your car left tracks in the soft loam where you parked it behind the ridge. Down by the outhouse where you killed Danny, we found a set of your footprints. Want to tell us about it?"

Strictly a monologue. I asked: "Why did you kill Kellett?"

A grunt.

"Did you get any of the cash?"

Not even a grunt.

"To hell with him!" Jim rasped. He fiddled with the radio, barked: "Sarge, send a couple of the boys to Nick's Tavern on West Plank! We picked up a mute."

WE hammered away at Merian until a sedan with two plainclothesmen parked next to us. Jim told one of the men: "This is that Merian man I told you about. He don't want to talk. See what you can do with him downstairs."

Merian got into their car. I leaned in through the window. The light from the neons outlined Merian's calm face. He seemed at peace with his world or maybe he liked talking to cops.

"About the girl," I said. "Barbara Nason, the girl in it with Kellett. She wasn't at the cottage, Merian. She's dead. Did you kill her too?"

It was the first question to jar his composure. "The Nason girl," he said slowly. "Sure she's dead?"

"Did you kill her?"

He wasn't angry. Or bitter. Or scared of what the cops might do to him. Just thoughtful and dignified. "I am not a murderer. Kellett was no good and her—just a drunk."

"My," Jim said, "it talks."

Merian aimed a stubby forefinger at Jim. "You mustn't tell lies, young man," he advised. "No footprints on pine needles."

He leaned tiredly against the cushions. Words slipped off his lips and I leaned in-

side the sedan to hear. Something about, "He was no good and she is a drunk."

We went for a brief ride down Plank Road. "He'll open up downstairs," Jim said cheerfully. "Sheriff, your headache is over."

"He was right," Baggs said.

"Right?"

"Right," Baggs chuckled. "There couldn't be footprints on pine needles, young man."

We parked. "She won't cause us any trouble," Jim said.

"Not her," I added.

"Merian come too easy," Baggs said. "I don't know about the wife."

An orange-colored jeep filled with a half-dozen shrieking youngsters went by twice as fast as the speed laws. "Some night," Jim said thoughtfully and shook his head at the gay speedsters.

"It happened up our way already," Baggs growled.

"Bad?"

"Doing sixty and overturned on a curve. Triple funeral."

We went into the boarding house without bothering to ring the bell or break down the front door. The living-room was dim and quiet. I went around flicking on switches until the room glowed with light. I knocked on the bedroom door and called: "Mrs. Merian!"

The door opened. She came out, clad in a voluminous dressing robe. Her feet were shoved inside flapping carpet slippers. "You!" she snapped at me. "The police want you so they—"

"This is police business," Jim cut in. "Sit down, Mrs. Merian."

She headed for a rocker, changed her mind in the center of the rug, veered, and plopped down hard on a divan that was buried inside a vile-colored cretonne cover. One hand automatically strayed to her hair and replaced an elusive hairpin.

"You three," she said and her voice had a spiteful ring. "What do you want of a respectable woman?"

HER eyes were overly bright. I had noticed a sweetish smell on her breath as she had swept past. I'm not the deductive type but hunches pop into my mind. "Can I take it, Jim?"

"Sure."

Her dark eyes jumped at me. She began to breathe as if she'd been running.

upstairs. Her nose had the same sharpness as Danny's, her eyes as crafty as his had been.

I began: "Make mine vanilla."

"Get it off your chest, copper."

"You like the taste of vanilla?"

"That isn't a crime."

"It's a bad habit."

"Habits belong to the ones that's got 'em, copper."

I hit her with a hammer. "We met Danny today."

Her heart jumped out on her face. Sharply: "He's all right?"

"Right enough to have talked. You want to add your two cents?"

"You're sure he's all right?"

I walked forward and stood in front of her. Suddenly I plucked something from her hair. It was a large-sized, black hairpin. I pulled a duplicate hairpin from my pocket, told the others: "One hairpin came from the back of Danny's car. They match."

Jim tumbled first. "So the aunt went along in the back seat. They killed the Nason girl after the theft because they didn't want to split the cash. That accounts for the bloodstain on the front cushion and the broken piece of eyeglass on the front mat."

I nodded. "Danny spilled it all, Mrs. Merian. After you killed the girl, Danny skipped off to that cottage on Crystal Lake. Want to tell us about Bertha Smathers?"

She didn't want to tell us anything, so I went on: "The night she and I were talking, you overheard part of the conversation. You realized that Bertha had discovered where Danny was but that she wouldn't tell me until the next morning because she wanted to go along with me. You had to seal her lips."

"Nuts," she said grimly.

Some of it, of course, was guesswork. "When I went into Bertha's room the next morning—this morning—she had her things laid out for the trip to Hallstead. Dress, underwear, stockings and shoes. But a woman doesn't wear a hat and a light summer coat to her grave! Nor take her pocketbook along! She told you she had a headache! You killed her with an overdose of barbiturates!"

"Nuts," she repeated.

She didn't deserve any pity. I let her have it. "Danny's dead. Shot through the head."

For a moment she didn't move. Then her mouth dropped open and her right hand dropped to the cushion. She came to life so fast that we were caught napping. She must have had that .32 revolver parked under the cushion and that's why she had veered from the rocker and gone to the divan. The gun was in her hand.

You move fast in the army. I was too far away from her to make a play for the gun. I dove like a Notre Dame fullback on Army's goal line. The .32 spoke. Singing death fled past my left ear. I'm lucky, that's all.

I lay flat on the rug, my clawing fingers a couple of feet from her bare ankles. I lay there and watched the angry twitching of her face. I lay there and watched the gun muzzle move down. I wasn't scared. A man who knows he's going on a long trip isn't scared. He's paralyzed.

Then a gun boomed behind me.

Her right arm jerked. The .32 slid from her nerveless fingers and hit the rug. Her shriek of pain filled the room and overflowed into West Plank Road.

It got kind of quiet in the room, as if we were on a lonely hill back at Hallstead.

"Me," Sheriff Baggs drawled, "I'm as old-fashioned as a buggy whip. No killer gets the drop on me."

You don't argue with words like that.

CHAPTER VIII

A Lot of Tombstones

AN ELDERLY MAN with a full white mustache, cherry-red cheeks, entered the waiting room of the Pennsylvania Railroad at Newark. He wore a straw hat, a neat black tie, and an old-fashioned black sack suit. His name was Jacob Pollett. He was Miss Bertha Smathers' uncle from Elmira and I was here to meet him.

We found a quiet corner and sat down. "Tell me all of it, Mr. Rainey," he pleaded. "Don't keep a single fact back, please."

So I unwound the case for him and filled in some of the gaps. "The night of the theft, Danny Kellett picked up his aunt. They drove into the country. The aunt pulled a gun and shot the Nason girl, killed her as casually as you'd slap at a horse fly. They buried the body in the Orange Reservation and the police uncovered the grave this morning. Approximately twenty thou-

sand dollars in cash had been hidden inside the mattress of Mrs. Merian's bed. That's most of it."

It was too much of it. He shook his head in puzzlement. "I'm an old man, Mr. Rainey. You read about such things in the newspapers but you don't expect them to happen to—to your own kin." His eyes were as lucid as an October morning in Elmira. "I can't possibly understand her killing my niece, nor understand Mr. Merian's killing his own nephew."

"Merian explained that later. Danny was Mrs. Merian's son."

"He murdered his own son?"

"No. It seems that Merian once took a job as a seaman and was gone for a year. When he returned, Mrs. Merian had a three-weeks-old son. She wouldn't explain. Danny grew up and lavished whatever affection he had on the mother. Then came the theft at Aircraft. Mr. Merian tried for two months to find out where Danny was. He hated the mother because she was a drunkard, and the son because he was no good. Merian was trimming the ramblers under my window the night I talked with Bertha. He learned about the letters addressed in green ink. Early the next morning he met the mail man, checked the postmark on the letter and headed for Hallstead. He was honest, Mr. Pollett."

The old man sighed. "You know, Mr. Rainey, the folks back home might get the wrong impression about Bertha taking all those pills. Isn't that like—like taking dope?"

"Don't worry about that. There were

only eight capsules in the original prescription and Bertha had gotten them because she was troubled with asthma and couldn't sleep during the hot weather. That's where Mrs. Merian made a mistake. She dissolved fourteen capsules in a glass of water. Bertha died quietly in her sleep."

People hurried across the vast room. Maybe they were taking trains to some lake resort up in the country. Or getting away from it. That's what trains are for.

He was saying, "You had a very busy time, Mr. Rainey."

"It isn't always like that. Most of the time it's boring. You trace a skip, or guard wedding gifts, or check on some light-fingered clerk at a soda fountain—stuff like that. I want to do something for your niece, Mr. Pollett."

"Isn't it a little late? Haven't you done enough?"

"She's going back to Elmira. The grave will need a headstone. I want to buy one. Yes, and suggest the epitaph if you don't mind."

"Yes?"

I'd thought a lot about that. "Her name, the dates, and the words, 'She had dreams in her eyes,' Mr. Pollett."

He thought that over gravely, then nodded. "I like that."

So we went away from there because he had work to do in Newark.

Sure, I'm a sentimentalist but I don't like people to know about it. And there is my commission to remember. Fifteen percent of twenty-thousand dollars will buy a lot of tombstones.

STOP! LISTEN! READ!

This ain't an order, pardner. It's just a suggestion to stop, listen to us, and read the next issue of LEADING WESTERN. We aren't talking through our ten-gallon hat when we tell you that every story in this Speed magazine western Ace is right out of the West—the West that used to be made up of owlhoot characters, ranny roughnecks, bushwack hombres and hardbitten galoots. It's what you'll like, all right. LEADING WESTERN . . .

SLAY RIDE

Illustrated by
Joseph Sokol



"All right you, where's
Kitty Carlson?" Dan hit
him, and the man sat.

DANNY DELANE moved up to the hotel desk and signed his name on the card in the neat leather holder the clerk shoved toward him. It was nice to walk into a hotel again, feeling that you could get a reservation without knowing the President and all the cabinet members by their first names.

"Staying long?" asked the clerk.

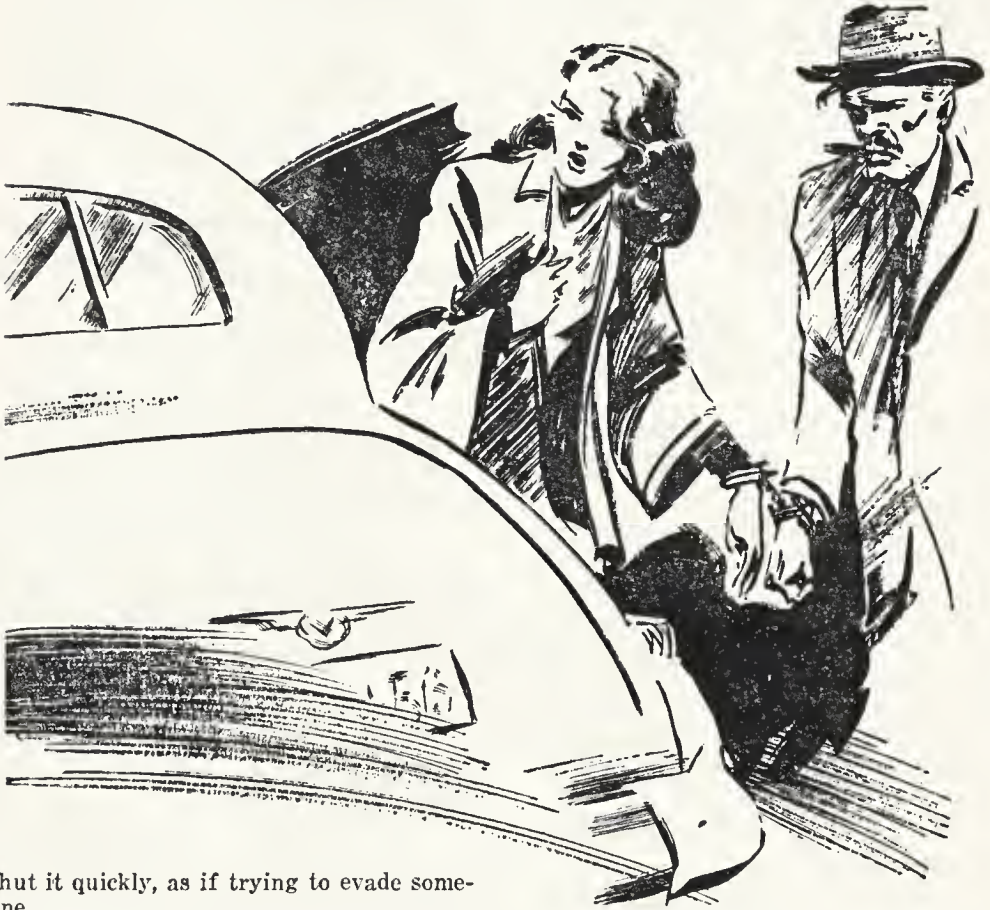
Danny didn't know. His, "Few days" was noncommittal. He turned around and scanned the lobby, looking for Kitty Carl

son. He didn't see her blonde head anywhere and he was somewhat annoyed.

Outside, the traffic of Reno's main street surged by in a never ending stream. He watched it for a full minute before following the bell boy toward the waiting elevator. In his room, after the boy had departed, he went to the window and stared down at the tumbling river hurrying its way into the desert beyond. A noise at the door made him turn. He thought for an instant it was the boy. It wasn't. It was Kitty. She had pushed the door only partly open and she slipped through the resulting crack and

He had promised a certain sweet one that he would do his best to clear her brother's name but the job turned out to be more than a little bitter—because DeLane found himself in the middle of a killing combine's activities that labeled him the next victim!

By W. T. BALLARD



shut it quickly, as if trying to evade someone.

DeLane watched her, his eyes getting a little narrow. "Hi, sweet, I looked for you in the lobby."

She got the door closed and stood with her back against it, breathing a little heavily. She was a tall girl, high-breasted, her sun-browned skin making her eyes a startling blue by contrast. Her hair was gold, not blond, and she wore it in a long bob which framed her face.

There was just the trace of Indian in the high-checkboned structure of her face but

it made for pleasantness and sharp-cut beauty. DeLane thought, every time I see her, it's the same. She gets me. There never was a woman like her in the world.

Aloud he said, "I've read the papers."

SHE gave him a quick, curt nod. "I thought you would."

"I got a plane as soon as your wire came."

"I knew that. I watched you register, from the balcony. The clerk's a friend of

mine. He said he'd put you in this room. I didn't want to speak to you in public, not until we'd talked things over. They're probably watching me."

"Who're they?"

"The police. They've been trailing me ever since night before last. They think I'll lead them to Jerry."

"Know where he is."

She shook her head. Her face had grown taut, her eyes a little bitter. "He's a wild kid, Danny, as wild as they come, but he's no murderer, certainly no cop killer. That's what you have to prove, that's why I sent for you. The only way we can clear Jerry is to find out who killed Cord. That's your job and you'll get no help in this town. All the police are certain Jerry did it. They'll not lift their hand to do one little thing for you."

"Okay, sit down." Danny DeLane settled on the edge of the bed. "Tell me what happened?"

"I don't know." She dropped into the chair beside the window. "We keep this house in town although we live at the ranch most of the time. The house isn't too much but it sets off by itself in the big yard which runs down to the river."

He nodded.

"Well, night before last, Jerry came into town. Some of the neighbors saw him on the street and he was gambling for a while at this hotel. About eleven, the neighbors heard shots from our place. They called the police. They went out there, found the lights on, this man Cord dead on the floor and a gun beside him, with Jerry's prints on it."

"Who was Cord?"

She shrugged.

"He wasn't a regular policeman but he held a special deputy's badge. He's in the mining business, or was."

"Did he know your brother?"

She nodded. "Slightly. Anyhow when the cops came, Jerry was still there. He ran out saying that someone had shot Cord. One of the men accused him of doing it. He knocked the man down and ran to his car. They tried to catch him but couldn't. The car was souped up plenty. They found it abandoned out on the road to Feather River. Apparently Jerry'd taken to the hills. If he has, they'll be a long time finding him. That country is rough. Parts of it haven't been seen in fifty years but Jerry knows his

way around. He could live up there for months, maybe years."

"So, what do you think happened?"

"I don't know. There's a girl in town, a singer at one of the clubs, who may know. Jerry played around with her for a while and Cord had showed some interest in that direction, but I can't get anything out of her. She won't even talk to me."

"You've had a rough time. Anyone who you can depend on?"

"No one but Lance Squire. He's the foreman out at our place. He was with Jerry during the war. They're friends. I can trust Lance but I figured that this took someone with some training, a detective who knew how to handle himself."

Danny DeLane didn't say anything. She didn't need to apologize for sending for him. He'd have come a hell of a lot further than L. A. if this girl had called. He'd asked her to marry him four times. She'd refused four times. She'd said, "I like you fine, Danny. I think you're one of the nicest people on earth but you just weren't cut out to be any woman's husband. You can no more help looking after each pretty girl you meet than you can stop breathing."

She told him how to get to the ranch. She'd arranged with the garage for him to have a car to drive. She told him the name of the singer Jerry had been interested in. Then she left.

"It's better that the police don't see us together," she said from the door. "It's better that they don't know you are working for me."

CHAPTER II

Gumming Up the Works

THE COPS arrived five minutes later. Danny had his shirt off and one side of his face shaved. They walked in without knocking, a tall one and a short one. The tall one said his name was Hargrave. He had a dented nose and the mousy eyes of an ex-fighter. He had a gruff voice which he tried to make harder than it really was.

"So you're Danny DeLane." He'd reversed the desk chair and sat down, straddling it, folding his big arms on the back and resting his square chin upon them.

"That's right," said Danny, "and where I come from, people knock on doors before opening them, even cops."

Hargrave grinned. It was mirthless, without any friendliness. "Where's Jerry Carlson?"

Danny had expected that. He shook his head. "You won't believe me but I don't know. I just got to town an hour ago."

"We know when you got to town. We know that Kitty Carlson has been up here. We know all about you, DeLane, and if you think we're going to let a private eye from L.A. come up here and turn things around you'd better think again."

Danny didn't say anything. He stepped back into the bathroom and shaved the other side of his face. Then he used a hot towel to remove the traces of lather. Hargrave didn't move. His partner wandered over and started going through Danny's open Gladstone.

Danny stepped into the door, the towel still in his big hands. "Keep out of that."

The man searching the bag paid no attention. He had a narrow face with a big, hawk nose. Hargrave had called him Pierce.

Danny snapped the towel. Its wet end cracked like a whip. It struck the seat of Pierce's pants and the man jumped as if he'd been shot. He jumped a good three feet. He swung around, his hand going inside his coat to the gun in the shoulder clip.

"Damn you."

Danny's gray eyes were bleak. "Keep out of my stuff unless you've got a warrant."

"Don't get tough," said Hargrave. He hadn't moved. He looked almost sleepy.

Danny DeLane blew out his cheeks with anger. "Look, this routine is so old it stinks. You can push around kids, or skid row bums, but I know my rights."

"He thinks he has rights." Hargrave looked at Pierce. The second cop had let go of his gun but he was still glaring at Danny.

"He'll find out."

"We don't want any trouble," said Hargrave, and his voice sounded almost reasonable. "We don't like outsiders coming in here and gumming up the works, that's all. We've got a job to do. We've got to find this Carlson kid. We've nothing against him and the best service you can give is to tell him to turn himself in."

"I'll tell him when I see him," said Danny. He started to put on a clean shirt.

Hargrave looked at his fist. It was evi-

dent he'd have loved to plant it directly in Danny's face. It was obvious that he didn't care for Danny. But he changed his mind. He got off the chair and jerked his head toward his partner. "Come on."

Pierce didn't want to go. Pierce didn't like Danny either. He hesitated and Hargrave said softly, "It's all right. We'll be back. We'll see him again."

THEY went out. Danny stared at the closed door but the bleakness didn't leave his eyes. This was going to be bad. He didn't need anyone to tell him how bad. He dressed carefully. He was in no hurry. He couldn't do much until evening, although he meant to take a look at the house.

That place was nothing extraordinary. It was white, frame, and it sat surrounded by an acre of ground which ended in a garden, bordered by the river.

He turned the car into the drive and parked behind the house. The place appeared deserted and Kitty had given him no key.

He approached the rear of the house and found the door fastened, but the porch was screened and he managed to remove one of them without too much difficulty. He stepped through and walked into the house.

The whole front was given over to a long living-room with a massive stone fireplace at one end. The floor was hardwood, covered by Indian throw rugs, and there was a gun rack above the mantel holding a couple of rifles.

DeLane went on through the house. The sun had dropped in the west and the light was getting poor. He pressed the button in the bigger bedroom and looked around. There were twin beds of curly maple with a chest of drawers to match, but the room had no feeling of being lived in and the closet was empty.

He was about to switch off the light and leave when he heard the step in the hall. He assumed it was the girl. No one else would know he was here unless the cops had followed him. But it wasn't the cops and it wasn't the girl. It was two men whom he'd never seen before.

THE first thing he saw was the gun. It looked big as a cannon, dwarfing the hand that held it although the hand was large. The man was large too. He wore a

wide-brimmed hat and a gray suit and shirt. There were sweat patches under his arms and beads of moisture across his forehead.

His voice was almost a growl. "Just don't try anything and you won't get hurt!"

Danny DeLane didn't try anything. He stood perfectly quiet while the second man came forward and got his gun. The second man wore blue slacks and a white shirt. He had on a kind of cap, as if he might be a chauffeur.

He got Danny's gun and stood back, not saying a word. His big partner seemed to be the leader, at least he did the talking.

"Okay, sport. Where is it?"

"Where's what?" DeLane wasn't particularly worried. They had gone through this as if they were taking the gun from him more as a protection to themselves than as a threat to him.

"The money," said the big man and suddenly his voice was hard. "We don't care about Cord. We didn't like him too well ourselves but we're going to get our dough, and if Jerry Carlson thinks he can beat us out of twenty-five grand by pulling the trigger on Cord, he'd better think again."

DeLane's first impulse was to tell the big man that he hadn't the slightest idea what he was talking about, then he thought, "If I'm going to help Kitty I'll have to know what's going on." He said, "Jerry isn't trying to beat you out of anything."

"The hell!" The big man was surprised. "What do you mean he isn't?"

DeLane shrugged. He was feeling his way. "What would you do if the cops were hot on your trail? You'd run, wouldn't you?"

"That's right but—"

"Where's the but?" asked DeLane. "He had to run. He had to get out fast. He had no time to get the money to you."

The big man was suspicious again. "What do you mean, he had no time? He was supposed to have it on him when he met Cord here. That's why he met Cord, to pay us off for the last trip."

DeLane shrugged again. "You get nothing by arguing with me. I've told you all I know. I wasn't in town when it happened."

"We know. We know who you are and that the girl sent for you."

DeLane was still fishing. "Look, I came here to help straighten things out. I haven't been in town three hours. Give me a couple

of days now. If you'll tell me how I can locate you when I get the money—"

The big man was suspicious again. "Didn't Jerry tell you?"

"I haven't seen him," said DeLane. "Give me time."

The big man hesitated. "Okay, you go to the Pelican Club and ask for Ed. And you'd better make it by tomorrow night. The boys aren't going to wait much longer. Give him his gun, Sam."

The smaller man produced DeLane's automatic. He emptied the clip and laid the shells on the window sill, then he handed the gun to Danny.

DeLane said, "You'll hear from me."

"We'd better," said the big man. "If we don't, we're going out to the ranch and talk to the girl."

They left. Danny could hear the noise of their heels along the hall but he didn't hear their car, and walking to the window he saw them cross the garden and go over the fence, close to the river. Slowly he reloaded the gun, then left the house.

CHAPTER III

Tough Baby

THE CLUB WESTERNER was a couple of miles out of town, a night club in the middle of the desert. Its parking lot was well filled when Danny turned the rented car in and found a place close to the fence.

He went through the long bar and paused in the gambling room. It was very early. Dealers idled about the tables but there was almost no play. He went across the thick carpet and peered into the dining room. The floor show was just starting.

A blonde in a dark uniform dress came toward him. "Do you have a reservation?"

Danny gave her his grade-A smile. "Do I need one?"

She inspected the smile and decided that he didn't. She showed him to a small table close to the dance floor. She lingered and Danny asked, "How's Della Brown?"

The woman considered him. "Do you know her?"

He shook his head. "No, but I was told to see her. I'm from L.A."

She mistook him for a talent scout. That's what he had hoped she'd do. "I'll tell her."

"No," he said. "Just bring her over to

the table after she finishes her number." A bill changed hands. The woman went away. A waitress came and took his order. The floor show started with a pony chorus. They weren't bad but there wasn't enough room for them; then Della Brown stepped up to the mike. She was a tall girl, black-haired and striking-looking without being too pretty.

She could sing, she was as good as the average canary, but no better. She sang four songs, then she bowed off. He saw the head waitress talking to her, then they threaded their way to his table.

He got up and pulled a chair out for the girl. The other woman lingered a moment but he held his silence until she moved away.

Della Brown watched him with black eyes. They were a little shiny, like well-licked licorice drops. He decided that he didn't like her very much, for no apparent reason. Her speaking voice was even huskier than it had sounded over the mike.

She said, "So, you're a talent scout, or is it a gag?"

"I'm a detective," he said and watched her eyes.

They lost their shiny glitter and got dull and careful. He thought, "She's got something to hide. She doesn't want to talk to a detective."

"Police?" she asked.

"Private," he told her. The fear stayed in her eyes and he put the knowledge away. She was as afraid of a private operative as she was of the police, perhaps more.

"What do you want?" She wanted to know.

"To talk to you quietly. Not here."

"I have another number in an hour."

He considered. "Your dressing room."

She hesitated, then nodded. He paid his check and followed her. The dressing rooms were behind the band stand, next to the kitchen. You could hear the rattle of pots and pans faintly through the thin wall.

THE room was plain, just a dressing table, bench, chair and a curtained corner. The girl turned around as soon as Danny shut the door, and she said sullenly, "Okay, start talking."

Danny asked, "Where's Jerry Carlson?"

He saw relief light her eyes. They were no longer dull. Evidently something besides Jerry Carlson's whereabouts was worrying



her, something much more important to her.

"I haven't the slightest idea." The words came in almost a rush. It was as if she'd been holding herself in, afraid to talk, and her relief acted as a valve turning on her tongue.

"I haven't seen him since the night of the murder. I told the police all that."

"I'm not working for the police," said Danny. "I'm trying to help Jerry. If you're a friend of his, you'll help me."

"Who says I'm not?"

"His sister for one."

"Oh, her." The dislike in the singer's tone was plain. "She doesn't know anything about it."

"That's why I came to you. I understood you knew this man Cord too?"

"Now look," said the girl, "if you're trying to make out that Jerry shot Cord because of me, you can stop right now."

"I wasn't doing that," said Danny. "But I do know that Jerry had some kind of a

business deal with Cord and I thought maybe you could tell me what it was."

She looked blank. It could have been an act, of course, but he thought not. She simply wasn't that good.

Apparently she didn't know any more than he did.

Danny got a feeling of hopelessness. He wasn't making any progress at all. There didn't seem to be anywhere to start. He said, "But you did see Jerry on the night of the murder."

"That's right. We had a quarrel. I might as well tell you. The cops already know but it didn't have anything to do with Cord. Danny wanted me to marry him right away and I said I wouldn't as long as his sister felt that way about me."

"What way?"

"She hates me. She thinks I'm trying to steal her precious brother. I'm telling you, mister, I don't need to steal any man. I can have any one of half a dozen by just bending my little finger."

"I'll bet you can." His eyes ran over her appraisingly. She was nicely put together. He knew a moment's regret that he had no time to get better acquainted. "And Jerry didn't say anything about having an appointment with Cord or anything?"

"He did not. I just told you that he wanted me to marry him. He wanted to catch the night plane for San Francisco for a honeymoon. Does that sound like he had a date with Cord?"

It didn't. It made things that much harder to understand. Jerry had left this girl, gone out to his house by the river and shot Cord. What had Cord been doing out there? What was this twenty-five thousand that Ed and Sam expected to get from Jerry?

DANNY felt as if his mind was spinning on pinwheels. Unless Cord's murder had been an accident, it made no sense, and yet there had to be a tie-up between Jerry and the murder victim, or Ed and Sam wouldn't be around looking for twenty-five gees.

But he had no real time to think it over, for the dressing room door opened suddenly and Hargrave and Pierce were standing there.

From their faces Danny judged that they were as surprised to see him as he was to see them. It was evident they had come to

see the girl on business of their own but they didn't like finding him present.

Hargrave said, "Well, well, the private snoop. I thought we told you to keep out of things."

Danny didn't speak. The girl had retreated against the far wall. Pierce said, "Maybe he should have a lesson."

"I think you have something," Hargrave moved a step into the room.

"Wait," said the girl. "Take him out of here."

Danny let his hand move toward his gun. Pierce stopped him. "Hold it, Bud." The man had a service revolver in his fist.

Danny held it. He didn't like this at all. He had a beating coming. He could almost smell it.

They moved around and took his gun, then Hargrave steered him into the hall and turned him toward the rear door. They stepped outside into moonlight. The distant mountains rose bleak and bare against the lighter sky.

Hargrave said, "Start walking." He sounded as if he were enjoying himself very much.

A voice from the right stopped them. "Just a minute, please." It was a soft voice, unhurried. Hargrave stopped. His partner stopped. Danny looked around in time to see a tall man step from the shadow of the buildings. The man asked, "You're Danny DeLane?"

"That's right," said Danny. He was certain he'd never seen the tall man before. He didn't care. At the moment he looked like an angel.

Hargrave's tone was tight. "Keep out of this, Squire."

So this was Lance Squire, Kitty Carlson's foreman. Danny looked him over quickly. He saw that the tall man was smiling a little as if he found the whole thing very amusing. "You're making a mistake, Hargrave."

The police detective swore. "You'd better keep out of this, my friend. We've got your name on the list already."

"Keep it there." Squire sounded indifferent. "But Mr. DeLane is a friend of my boss. You aren't handing out a beating tonight."

Hargrave took a step forward and Squire hit him with his right hand. His left held a gun which he turned on Pierce as Hargrave sat down. "I'd like to blast you."

Squire's tone was conversational. "I don't like cops."

Pierce sputtered. "We've got you now, hitting an officer."

"Nuts." Squire spat in the dust at the man's feet. "You're out of town, Mac. 'You've got no more jurisdiction than I have and you know it. Come on, DeLane.'"

"Pierce has my gun," said Danny.

"Give it to him," Squire ordered.

PIERCE silently passed the automatic across. "We'll meet again," he promised darkly.

"Not if I see you first," Danny told him. He turned and walked away at Squire's side. The man was unhurried and seemed certain that they wouldn't be followed.

"Those two." He snorted. "I don't see why they keep them around. They're a couple of cheap heels, but with wages what they are, they take anything nowa days."

"Lucky you happened along," said Danny. "There were a couple of black eyes that had my name on them."

Squire looked at him. "I didn't happen. Kitty figured that you'd go out and talk to Della. She thought there might be trouble so she told me to hang around the bar. I was there when you came in. Then when Hargrave appeared I tailed him back to her dressing room."

"Why should there be trouble if I talked to Della?"

The ranchman shrugged. "I don't know. The guy who owns that joint, Tony Mido, doesn't like people bothering her."

"Who's Mido? I didn't see him."

"You wouldn't," said Squire. "He keeps out of sight mostly. He's a little guy, only five feet tall, but he can be tough when he chooses and the talk is that he has a yen for Della and that something happens to people who get in his way."

"Meaning he wouldn't like Jerry playing around with the girl?"

"You catch on quick."

Danny felt that Squire was trying to tell him something. "You think that maybe this Mido might have killed Cord and framed it to look as if Jerry did the shooting?"

"Could be." Squire had reached Danny's rented car and opened the door. "You follow me. I'll take you out to the ranch. It won't be safe for you to go back to town after your run-in with Hargrave."

"Wait a minute. Cord was playing

around with the girl. This Mido wouldn't like that. He shot Cord and framed Jerry. That way he got rid of both of them."

"Could be." Squire did not sound excited.

"I'm going back and talk to Mido."

Squire looked at him. "You're a damned fool," he said. "I pull you out of one jackpot and you want to walk right back into another one. Come on. I'm going to the ranch."

"Go ahead."

They looked at each other in silence. Squire sounded slightly aggrieved. "I don't mind going up against Hargrave. He's nine-tenths wind but Mido is different. He's a tough baby and you won't gain a thing by talking to him. To hell with it. Are you coming, or aren't you?"

"I'm not coming."

For an instant Danny thought Squire was going to try to put him into the car forcibly. Then the tall man shrugged, turned on his heel and walked to a battered station wagon. He started the motor, backed around and drove from the parking lot without even looking in Danny's direction.

DeLane watched him go, then he turned around and looked at the building. Neither Hargrave nor Pierce was in sight. He had no idea where they were, but now that he had his gun back he didn't much care. They'd caught him in the dressing room, not expecting trouble, but he wouldn't make that mistake again.

CHAPTER IV

Hunting Trouble

HE WENT BACK into the building. He used the rear door and found the kitchen. A stout man in a white apron and chef's cap stared at him not pleasantly. "You're in the wrong spot, brother."

"I'm in the right spot," said Danny. He had the automatic in his side coat pocket, his hand on it, just in case he happened to run into Hargrave and the big cop still wanted to play rough. "I'm looking for Mido and I don't want to go through the front."

The cook considered him. The man was a very good cook but not very fast-witted. He resented having to work in a place where people had more interest in roulette wheels than they had in his food.

He said, "You used the wrong door. The other door at the back leads directly to Tony's office."

Danny nodded his thanks. He went back outside and around to the other door. It wasn't locked and he edged it open gently, not making any noise. He found himself in a tiny entryway facing a second door. He was about to try this when he heard voices from the other side and paused.

He heard Della say, "There was a private dick in to see me."

A man answered her. His voice was high, almost soprano, but it was still a man. "What did he want? Had he traced you?"

"I don't think so. He was asking questions about Jerry Carlson."

"Oh." The man sounded relieved, as if Carlson, or what happened to him was of little importance. "Then he wasn't after you?"

"I don't think so."

"What happened to him?"

She laughed. "I guess he's picking himself out of the cactus somewhere. Hargrave and his partner took him out to work over."

The man laughed shrilly. "We won't see him again. It's about time for your act. I'll see you later."

Danny waited until he was sure the girl had gone, then he gently tried the knob. The door wasn't locked and he pressed it open with his left hand while he pulled his gun with his right. Then he thrust the door inward.

THE man behind the big desk looked almost like a doll. He was perfectly formed but on a small pattern. His features were sharp-cut like a cameo and his mouth was thin-lipped and a straight line.

His hair was fine and very black and combed carefully, as if it were a skull cap fitting closely on his small head. He sat facing the door which Danny had thrust inward but his expression did not change, his dark eyes showed no surprise.

"Who in hell are you?"

Danny stepped in. He used his left hand to close the door and stood against it. He said softly, "I'm Danny DeLane, a private dick from L.A."

Mido's eyes flickered once more then. He wet his tight lips by thrusting the tip of his tongue through them. "What do you want?"

Danny shrugged. "You've got a girl sing-

ing here. She calls herself Della Brown. Della Brown is a nice name."

"Damn you," said the small man. He pushed back his chair and stood up. He wasn't much taller than he had been sitting down. Danny thought of the old gag question. "Why are you standing in a hole, Bud?" He didn't ask it aloud. He thought Mido might be touchy about his lack of height.

He said instead, "Calling names won't help us."

"What's her husband want?" Mido demanded.

So Della Brown was running away from a husband. Danny hadn't known that. He hadn't known anything about her at all. He didn't really want to know anything about her. What she did was her business as long as it did not affect Kitty Carlson.

He smiled at the small man. "Look, Mido. I'm not hunting trouble with you. I've got a pocket of it without any more."

"You'll have plenty if you go back to L.A. and tell that no-good husband of hers where Del is."

"That's the point. I'm up here on something else. I'll make a trade. I need help and only a local boy can give me that help. Tell me what I want to know and I'll forget that there ever was a singer named Brown, or whatever she chooses to call herself."

Mido considered. "You're levelling?"

"I never levelled more in my life."

"Okay, what do you want to know?" He sat back down at the desk. All the tension had gone out of his small body.

Danny explained, "I'm working for a girl named Carlson. Her brother is accused of killing a man named Cord."

"I know that." Mido sounded impatient.

"All right. I'll trade my silence about your girl friend for a little talk on your part."

Mido's eyes looked a little glassy. "What do you want to know?"

"What was Cord's racket?"

The small man considered DeLane carefully. "He was a mining man—"

"Nuts," said DeLane.

Mido shrugged. "That's what I always heard."

"You've heard other things," DeLane said. "A smart guy like you doesn't operate without knowing what goes on. Cord was tied up with a couple of guys named Ed and Sam who hang out at the Pelican Club.

They were supposed to get twenty-five grand on the night Cord was killed. Why?"

Mido wet his lips. "You seem to know a lot."

"Some things, yes."

"Okay, think about airplanes that land out on the Carlson ranch. That's all I know."

It was, too. At least Danny couldn't get another word out of him. He turned toward the door. Mido said, "Keep your deal, brother. If Della has trouble, I'll come looking for you."

Danny nodded. He stepped out, quickly closing the door behind him. He made his way along the edge of the parking lot with one eye out for Hargrave or his partner. He saw neither but near the front of the building, close to the bar entrance was a frame with a glass front.

DeLane stopped to look at it. Della's picture was there. He thoughtfully examined the frame. It wasn't locked. He opened the glass, removed the girl's picture, then walked rapidly to his parked car.

THE airport was deserted save for the office force. He went in and talked to the man in charge. "How's about flying a small package to Los Angeles and delivering it tonight?" The man didn't know. Danny used the phone, found a pilot with a B. T. who would make the trip. He wrapped up Della's picture and a note to his partner in which he said, "Find out who the dame is and what she's running from." Then he asked the airport man if there was a landing field on the Carlson ranch.

The man gave him a studied look. "There's a mountain meadow," he said, "that you could land in, only there are no lights."

"Just curious," said Danny, knowing that this did not satisfy the man's suspicions, and not caring. He went out, got the rental car and drove to the ranch. It took an hour and a half. It was late when he got there but Kitty Carlson and Lance Squire were still up.

The girl asked, "Find anything?"

He shook his head. "Nothing we can use. The Brown girl has another name somewhere and she doesn't like private detectives. I caught the idea that she's running from something. She didn't say what."

The foreman said in his soft voice, "No more trouble with Hargrave?"

Danny shook his head. "No more trouble but I thought it wisest to come out here instead of going back to the hotel."

Squire gave him a shy grin. "I don't blame you."

Kitty said in a discouraged voice, "We simply aren't getting any place at all."

Squire shook his head. "I'm sorry, Kate, but if you ask me, we *won't* get anywhere. You know how I feel about Jerry. We went through a lot together and I wouldn't turn him in if he were sitting here at the moment, but I can't see it any other way. He got Cord."

"But why?" The girl looked from one man to the other.

Squire shrugged. "That singer," he said. "Jerry was nuts about her and you know it."

"That's right—"

"Wait a minute." Danny DeLane looked from one to the other. "I did turn up something. A couple of guys named Sam and Ed cornered me out at your house beside the river. They wanted dough they claimed that Jerry owed them. They wanted twenty-five thousand."

"Twenty-five thousand—for what?"

He shook his head. "That's what I'm asking you."

"I don't know anything about it." She turned to look at Lance Squire. "Do you know any Sam or Ed who had business dealings with Jerry?"

He said he didn't. He looked as puzzled as the girl.

"One thing more," Danny asked them. "Is there a landing field on the ranch?"

"A landing field?"

He nodded.

Squire said, "There's a meadow up in the hills. A movie company used it two years ago. They flew their film out of location up there but I'd hardly call it a landing field."

"Been used since?" Danny was watching him.

The man shook his head. "Not to my knowledge, although I haven't been up there in months. That field is a good twenty miles from this house and the country around is pretty rough."

"Is there a road out of here?"

The foreman stirred "What's on your mind?"

Danny wasn't certain. All he had was Mido's word about airplanes. He said,

"Let's go to bed. I've had about enough for one day."

CHAPTER V

A Lot of Nerve

IN THE MORNING he called his partner in Los Angeles. "Did you get that picture of the girl I sent you?"

His partner sounded excited. "I'll say I did!"

"Find out who she is?"

"Yeah, that was easy. She ran out on her husband's trial. They wanted him for smuggling diamonds in from South America. But it isn't the authorities who are really looking for her."

"Who is it?"

"A couple of guys from Mexico City, named Gandz. She's supposed to have gone down there after her old man went to Atlanta, and she vanished with a whole flock of diamonds. They call her Diamond Doll. Her name is Hornell. Doll Hornell, but she's used a dozen. What's she doing in Reno?"

"Singing," said Danny.

"She always sings except in court," said his partner. "What do you want me to do?"

"Get that pal of yours to wire Mexico City and tell those Gandz characters where their girl friend is."

His partner said, "That's not necessary. They're in L.A. They traced her this far."

Danny chuckled. "Okay, send them up here. Tell them she's singing at the Club Westerner."

"Shall I have them look you up first?"

Danny swore under his breath. "Ixnay. What are you trying to do, get me killed so you can have the business all to yourself?" He hung up and went out. Kitty Carlson was having breakfast under a striped awning at the far end of the patio. She indicated the empty place.

"Don't you ever get hungry?"

"Work first," said DeLane, dropping into his seat. "I've been busy building a little fire under a couple of people."

Kitty looked at him curiously. "Fire?"

He said, "Detective work is a lot of digging, honey, a lot of work and some breaks. I'm no master mind. Master minds only grow in movies. We haven't been getting the breaks, so I'll help things along by scar-

ing a couple of people. People do things when they're scared that they might not ordinarily do."

She watched him, her forehead creasing a little with worry. "Danny?"

"Yeah?"

"What if Jerry is guilty?"

He considered her. "I thought you were certain he couldn't be."

She passed her hand tiredly across her eyes. "I'm to the point where I'm not certain of anything. If he were. . ."

"What would you want me to do?"

"What could you do?"

He spoke slowly, deliberately. "Well, I might frame someone for Cord's murder; I might help Jerry get out of the country; or, I could turn him in."

She drew her breath sharply. "You don't mean that last?"

Danny DeLane frowned. "Don't I . . . you don't understand much about my racket, do you, honey?"

"I thought. . ."

"You thought we were all a bunch of heels? Well, we are, but you play the game straight or you don't last at it long. If I find Jerry is guilty, I'd have to turn him in, but I may prove that he isn't." He tried to make this last sound convincing but he wasn't very successful.

HE DIDN'T offer to take the girl with him. He didn't want her along. He drove to the airport and found a pilot who knew where the landing strip on the Carlson ranch was. They took off in a B. T., circling higher and higher, getting altitude.

The country below them looked plenty rough and DeLane hoped they wouldn't have to make a force landing. He kept watching but he didn't see the strip until the pilot pointed it out, then he said on the inter-com.

"Can you land and get off again?"

The man moved his shoulders. "Sure, I guess so, but it's a bad deal. You either take off down hill or down wind. You can have your choice. Either is a bad deal."

"Try it," said DeLane and set his teeth. He didn't like flying much.

The pilot nodded. He went down for a look. The valley was a saucer rimmed by higher tree-blanketed hills. It was fairly level; at least it looked level enough from the air.

They made a couple of trial runs before

they set down, and the landing was good although a little bumpy. The pilot taxied to a stop and they climbed out.

The grass was marked by the wheels of other planes and there were flares along the far end. The pilot stared at all this in amazement.

"Looks like someone's been landing in here regularly!"

"Not picture people?" Danny asked.

The man shook his head. "Not that I've heard anything about."

Danny walked across the field to the far side. Here a road led off to the right, twisting in and out of the trees as it climbed the grade.

"Where does that go?"

The flyer shrugged. "To town if you travel far enough. It's about a four or five hour drive I'd guess; I never tried it myself."

"Looks like it's been used recently." Danny was examining the tracks. "Several cars, different tires."

The pilot scratched his head. "Now what would anyone be wanting to land up here for? It just doesn't make sense. There's no fishing worth mentioning and nothing at the old mine."

"Mine, what mine?"

"It's about a mile up the road. Hasn't been worked in forty years but that movie company rebuilt the buildings."

"Let's have a look," Danny suggested. He half expected the pilot to refuse but apparently the man's curiosity was aroused. They trudged up the road to the mine buildings.

HERE THE evidence of cars was more apparent. The grass was beaten down and they found canned goods in the commissary.

The pilot told him, "Beats me, unless there's been another picture bunch on location that I didn't know about."

Danny was looking at the buildings speculatively. "Could a transport, say a DC 3, land back at that field?"

"If the pilot knew his stuff."

"And could one fly in from—say Mexico?"

The man turned to look at him. "What do you know, Doc?"

Danny shook his head. "Nothing. I'm just talking and if you're a nice guy you won't mention it to a soul. Come on, let's get back to town."

The pilot took off down wind and they

got into the air with not too much trouble. When they reached the airport DeLane did not linger but turned the rented car toward the Club Westerner.

Only the bar was open. The gambling tables were covered and the dining room was dark. He asked no questions but went directly to Mido's office.

The small man still sat behind the huge desk. He might not have moved since the time Danny had seen him on the night before. At least there was no sign he had moved. "What do you want?"

"To do you a favor," Danny told him.

Tony Mido steepled the fingers of his small hands. "I don't like it when people do me favors," he said. "It usually costs money."

"This will cost," said DeLane. "But that merely proves it's a real favor."

"What is it?"

"Get your pal Della Brown out of sight. They've traced her. They'll be here in a couple of hours."

"Stop the double talk. Who's they?"

"The Gandz brothers."

Mido jerked erect. As he came up on his small feet his hand dipped into a half-open drawer and came out with a thirty-eight.

"Okay, you double-crossing bum. Take it."

Danny didn't move but he fully expected to feel a bullet bouncing off his wishbone. This little guy was as dangerous as a coiling snake and his reactions were as rapid.

What kept Mido from shooting, Danny never knew. Perhaps the fact that he hadn't flinched at sight of the gun. Slowly the tension went out of the smaller man's shoulders but he did not lower the gun.

"How do you know they're on their way here?"

"I had a tip from L.A. by phone."

"You turned her in."

Danny shrugged. "Why would I do that?" He was careful not to lie. He made it a point never to lie when the truth would do.

The small man was undecided. "Then who?"

Danny shook his head. "Don't ask me."

"I should shoot you," said the small man.

"What would that buy you?"

Mido was uncertain. He didn't know. He sat down slowly and laid the gun on the desk. Danny heard him call the girl. He heard him tell her to get out to the guest

ranch and lay low until she got word from him. Then he hung up and examined DeLane with brooding eyes.

"You said you wanted payment. What?"

"Twenty-five grand," said Danny. "This Ed and Sam want twenty-five gees. They think they have it coming from Jerry Carlson. If they don't get it by tonight, they're going to make trouble."

"What's that to me?"

Danny shrugged. "I wouldn't know, only those Gandz brothers lost some diamonds in Mexico City and they want them bad."

"You rat." Mido's hand reached again for the thirty-eight.

"Don't," said Danny. He had his own gun in his hand. He'd slipped it from his pocket while Mido phoned the girl.

THEY stared at each other. Danny said, "Were the diamonds flown in?"

Mido stretched his arms. "Pal, you've got your wires crossed somewhere. You think I'm mixed up in this. Well, I'm not. I tried to play it nice last night. I told you to watch for airplanes."

"I watched for them," said Danny. "I found where they land."

"Okay," said Mido. "That should tell you the whole story."

"You tell me," said Danny. "Tell me what they bring in and why this Ed and Sam think that Jerry Carlson should owe them twenty-five grand."

"Ask them."

"I'm asking you."

The small man sighed. "I didn't want to get mixed up in this. I'm telling you I know nothing about it. All I do know is that when Della sneaked out of Mexico City, she made a deal with a guy to get her back into the United States without having to clear customs. They drove her north to an isolated air field. A plane picked her up and dropped in on the field at the Carlson ranch. And she wasn't alone. The plane brought in ten others."

Danny's eyes narrowed. "What happened to the others?"

The small man shrugged. "They were picked up in cars and driven to various parts of the United States. The men who met the plane didn't like Della staying in town. They usually get their cargo out of Nevada, away from the airport as fast as they can."

Danny nodded. He could understand that.

"Who's behind it?" he asked.

The small man spread his hands. "Don't quote me but whose ranch did the plane land on?"

"Jerry Carlson, huh?"

"That's the way it looks. The way I have it figured, Carlson arranged for the planes, Cord had charge of the boys who drive the smuggled people out of the state. Probably Cord and Carlson quarrelled over the pay off out at Carlson's river house, and Carlson shot him. If you ask me, Carlson isn't hiding in the hills at all. He grabbed a plane and is probably in Mexico."

"Why didn't you tell the police all this?"

The small man looked at him. "Could I tell them without putting them on Della's trail?"

He couldn't, of course. There might be other reasons why he hadn't told the police. He might have a small finger in the smuggling racket himself. That might explain his connection with the Brown girl. But if that were true, why was he telling all this now? DeLane considered. Certainly everything he told tended to pile up the damning evidence against the missing Jerry Carlson. Perhaps the small man was using Carlson as a blind; perhaps Mido had been behind the smuggling racket and no one had known of his connection save the dead Cord.

If that were true, by killing Cord in the Carlson house, by throwing suspicion on Jerry, the little man was slipping from under.

THERE was yet another angle. Cord must have known that Della Brown had returned to this country without clearing customs. He might have used this knowledge to promote himself with the girl, and Mido or she or both had killed Cord to silence him. Then Jerry had chosen the wrong moment to go to the house, had picked up the murder gun, leaving his prints on it, and now Mido was busy cinching the case against the missing boy. There were so many possible angles that DeLane felt a little dizzy.

He thought it was this dizziness which made the far door seem to move. It wasn't. The door actually swung inward and two men came into the room.

They were strangers but they looked alike, and from the first words he guessed who they were.

"Where's that Brown dame?" The first man was tall. He had a gun in his hand. He wore a tropical worsted suit that was wrinkled as if it had been slept in.

He was dark but not Spanish. Danny DeLane tried to guess at his nationality. The name Gandz was no help. It might be anything.

Mido turned to look at his visitors. He didn't seem surprised by the gun in the

DeLane clipped him with a neat rabbit punch, as he passed him.



man's hand. He said in his high voice, "You're in the wrong stall, Mac."

The second brother shut the door. He was shorter than the one who held the gun, heavier, but his face was almost the same. It was startling, like twins, one of whom had grown up, the other sideways.

"No," said the tall man. There was a knife-thin scar across his left cheek, running down to the corner of his mouth. "We traced her here. We talked to a couple of cabmen. She sang at this club last night."

"She isn't here now." Mido appeared unmoved.

"You'll show us."

"No," said Danny DeLane. "He won't show you."

The tall brother turned to look at DeLane. "Why not?"

"Because he doesn't know where she is. She ran out on him."

The man hesitated, uncertain. In that second Mido had his gun in his hand. His thin lips curled back in what could have been mistaken for a grin.

"Thanks, DeLane." He shot once. His bullet striking the tall man in the shoulder, making the gun clatter from the nerveless fingers. The brother leaped forward and DeLane clipped him with a neat rabbit punch as he passed. He went forward as if his neck was broken. It wasn't, but he was out cold.

Mido stared down at the fallen man, his mouth open.

"Where'd you learn that?"

"From a sergeant in the army."

"The army's good for something." The small man pushed a buzzer at the side of his desk. A big man in the apron of a bartender appeared.

Mido said, "Get a couple of guys and a car." The big man disappeared.

DeLane was curious. "What are you going to do with them?"

"Take them up in the hills and dump them."

"That solves nothing unless they're both dead."

"They won't be," said Mido. "I'm not crazy enough to lay myself open to a murder rap. But by the time they walk out, Della will be long gone."

"Say Doll," DeLane suggested.

"You've got a lot of nerve," Mido told him. "If she heard you, she'd hit you right in the nose."

CHAPTER VI

Hidden Airport

DETECTIVE HARGRAVE was in a bad humor. His breakfast hadn't been good and the Chief had spoiled his lunch by bawling him out. "If you don't get a lead on that Cord killing by evening I'll put someone else on it."

Hargrave felt that the world wasn't treating him right. He didn't know where to begin. And then the desk sergeant called to say that a Danny DeLane was outside and wanted to see him.

Hargrave couldn't believe his ears. He rubbed his fat hands together, then clenched them into fists. He could almost feel the contact as his knuckles cracked against DeLane's head. He called Pierce and told his partner to get up there fast, then he told the sergeant to show Danny in.

DeLane walked into the office as if he were coming home, as if he had had no trouble with Hargrave. Pierce followed him in, his eyes widening a little at sight of the private eye.

"What gives?" Pierce asked.

Hargrave was being polite. "We have a caller," he said. "Smile at the nice man."

Pierce leered. DeLane laughed. "Some day you bums are going to get a job in Hollywood, scaring kids, in horror films. Lay off the rough stuff long enough for me to do you a favor."

"So now he wants to do us a favor." Hargrave leaned forward. "Hold onto your gun; he'll probably swipe it."

DeLane paid no attention. "There's a girl who has been singing at the Club Westerner, under the name Brown. She'll be leaving town, probably by plane sometime this afternoon or evening. She'll have some diamonds with her that were stolen in Mexico City."

Both men were staring at him. Hargrave forgot to puff on the cigar stuck in the corner of his mouth. "What are you talking about? I thought you were up here working for the Carlson girl?"

"Did I tell you that?"

The police detective thought back. He shook his head grudgingly. "No, but . . ."

"Well I am." DeLane smiled. "It's all tied in, my friend. This Brown girl came here from Mexico City in a plane. She landed at a hidden airport on the Carlson

ranch. There were other people on the same plane sneaking into the country."

Pierce started to get excited. "A smuggling deal! Do the feds know?"

DeLane shook his head. "You boys can have all the credit."

Hargrave was still suspicious. "What kind of a whizzer is this?"

DeLane was frank. "I need help. You can pick up the Brown girl, the diamonds, and expose the gang who has been smuggling people into the States illegally, but you've got to play it my way or it won't work."

"I'd rather get my hands on Jerry Carlson." Hargrave was gloomy.

"I might arrange that too, or at least hand you the man who shot Cord."

They stared at him.

Pierce said, "Mister Fixit. It's a shame you aren't on the force."

"If I was," said Danny, "you could all retire and go home for good. Do you play it my way or not?"

"We play." Hargrave threw away his frayed cigar. "But, brother, if this is a merry-go-round you're getting us on, you are going to be very sorry indeed."

Danny did not show any concern. He said, "Okay, have Pierce pick up the Brown dame when she shows at the airport. Just hold her there until you hear from us. I don't want them to find out she's been collared."

"Who are they?"

"Mido and his friends, if he has any."

"And what do we do?" Hargrave lumbered to his feet.

"We go see a guy named Ed. Don't open your mouth; let me do the talking. All I want is your badge."

THE PELICAN was a mean dive on a side street. There was a dirty bar, a crap table, a roulette layout and a couple of twenty-one games. The customers looked as if they should have been playing for pennies.

Danny DeLane paused just inside the door. After the sun brightness of the street the interior looked dim and smoky. He started to move toward the bar, then stopped as he saw the man he was searching for at the rear table. He changed his direction and moved up to Ed's side.

"How's the luck?"

Ed had a stack of silver dollars in his big

hand. He turned around and measured DeLane slowly with his eyes. "Fair. How's yours?"

"Not bad," said DeLane.

"Got the twenty-five gees?"

"I want to talk to you about that. Come on outside."

The man's expression did not change. "Nothing to talk about, feller. Either you have it or you don't. If you don't, you'll be sorry."

"Sorry?"

"That's right. We have the girl."

A cold hand seemed to reach out from somewhere and close its clammy fingers around Danny DeLane's heart. "Girl, what girl?"

"The Carlson kid." Ed spoke in a confident undertone. "Sam has her and he'll hang onto her until we get our dough."

Danny's impulse was to smash his fist into the man's smirking face. He'd never felt quite like this before. He always managed to approach his work with a certain detachment. But he was filled now with a slow murderous rage which made him feel that nothing save physical violence would do.

"Where is she?"

"She's not hurt, yet," said the man. "She won't be if I get our dough tonight."

DANNY'S impulse was to warn him that she'd better not be hurt. This changed his plans. He wanted now to get away from here, to try and raise the money somehow. After all, he could close up the rest of it when Kitty was safe. He'd left Hargrave outside. He wanted to keep the city detective away from Ed.

But he was too late. Hargrave had crossed him up. Hargrave was already in the room, moving toward them. Ed saw him. His eyes widened. "You dirty bum!" He snarled at Danny and swung flatly on his heel, jumping for the rear door.

Danny hit him behind the ear. He hit him neatly, without fuss. The man fell forward onto his face.

Hargrave moved with surprising quickness. Before half the men in the room realized what had happened he was at Danny's side. "Let's get him out of here. This is a bad spot."

Between them they hoisted the unconscious man to his feet and walked out with his sagging body between them.

At the curb Danny opened the door of

his rented car and they shoved the man inside.

Hargrave asked, "What happened?"

"They've got Kitty Carlson." Danny's face was bleak.

"Kidnaped her?" The big city man was surprised. "Take him down to headquarters. We'll beat it out of him."

"I'll do the beating," said Danny, "and I need no help from you. And we aren't going to headquarters; we haven't time. We're going to the airport."

He started around toward the driver's seat and heard someone call his name. He turned and saw Lance Squire in the ranch station wagon driving slowly down the street.

"Hey, DeLane, seen Kitty? She was supposed to met me at your hotel and she never showed up."

Danny wasted no time in explanations. "Follow us!" he called and climbed into the car.

At the airport there was turmoil. Pierce stood in the shade of the administration building. He had a cuff on Della Brown's wrist. Mido was standing in front of him, almost jumping up and down with rage.

The small gambler spun around as Danny pulled up, and started to curse him in three languages. Danny paid no attention. "Find the diamonds?"

"I'll say." Pierce was shaken out of his normal calm.

Lance Squire brought the station wagon to a sliding stop in the loose gravel. "What goes on?"

Danny didn't answer. He turned to the coupe from which Hargrave was dragging Ed and helped the city detective to stand the groggy man on his feet. "All right, you, where's Kitty Carlson?"

"I don't know."

Danny hit him once and the man sat down. Hargrave said, "Hey, don't knock him out. He won't be able to talk."

"I won't." DeLane's breath sounded a triple short. "I'll just cut him to pieces with my fists."

The man on the ground shook his head vaguely. "Won't do you no good . . . Never find her . . . Sam don't hear from me . . . take her out of country. . ."

Danny swung around to the airport manager. "Got a plane, a DC 3 that can set down on that mountain meadow?"

The man looked uncertain. The pilot who

had flown Danny before spoke up. "I'll take them in."

"Okay," said Danny.

Squire said sharply. "Tell me what's the matter?"

Danny told him quickly. The man's face got a white drawn look. "If they've done anything to Kate, I'll personally kill them."

"They haven't yet," said Danny. "They want the twenty-five gees they have coming."

"From who?"

"From Jerry Carlson or me, or anyone."

"To hell with them. They haven't a chance," Squire said.

"They say they'll take the girl out of the country, probably on the next smuggling plane."

"There won't be any more."

Danny nodded. "But that means they're holding her up in the hills at the old mine near the airport. Want to come?"

"Of course," Squire said.

Danny turned toward where the DC 3 was being wheeled out. Mido seized his arm. "What are you going to do with Della?"

Danny had forgotten the girl. He looked at Pierce. "Bring her along. We might as well make this an air party." He looked at Mido. "You want to come too?"

The small gambler hesitated. Under Danny's eyes he seemed not to dare to refuse. Without a word he turned and walked to the big plane.

CHAPTER VII

Licked

THE LANDING STRIP seemed to rush up at them. The transport came in faster than the smaller ship Danny had used before. Only the thought that the smugglers had made several landings here without a crackup was reassuring.

They came to earth and he felt the brakes biting at their speed, cutting it down, slowing the heavy ship. But when they finally came to a stop, they only had a few feet to spare.

Once on the ground Hargrave said, "What now?"

Danny turned grimly to the prisoner Ed. "You're going up the trail with me," he told the man, a savage note in his words. "If Kitty Carlson is okay, I'll see that you

get off easier! If she's been hurt in any way, I'll take you to pieces with my hands."

Hargrave said, "You can't take the law into your own hands. I'm a cop and . . ."

"And you're outside your jurisdiction," Danny told him. "I'm not even certain whether this spot is in Nevada or California and I don't care. If we go marching up that trail like an army, we'll get that girl killed surer than the devil."

Squire said solidly, "I'm going."

Danny looked at the man's white face. He thought suddenly, "The guy's in love with Kitty. Why didn't I see it before? I was so busy being crazy about her myself that I never realized how he felt."

He shook his head. "Sorry. I'm going up there alone with Ed. Sam expects me to pay off the dough. He might not get too excited if he saw me coming. If someone else is with us, he might hurt the girl." He turned to the sullen driver. "Let's go."

Without a word the man turned toward the trail. "If you hear shots," Danny said, "come running. If I'm not back in two hours, come running anyhow." He followed the man without a backward glance. The trees closed in around them, cutting off all view of the airport.

He plodded along, Ed three or four steps before him, and Danny couldn't help thinking that Sam must be watching the trail. He couldn't have missed hearing the plane land and with a rifle he could pick Danny off neatly without any danger to his partner.

Danny considered moving up closer to the man so that Ed's big body might provide a kind of shield. But he decided against it. It was better to walk naturally. He wasn't as apt to arouse Sam's suspicions.

They had covered almost the full distance before they were challenged; then Sam's voice came sharply from the trees on the right. "Hold on!"

DANNY stopped. No one told him to but he raised his hands high so there could be no mistake. He saw Sam move out of the trees, a rifle cradled in the crook of his arm.

"What happened?"

Ed told him in sharp, angry sentences. He said, "I ought to beat this dick within an inch of his life!"

"You won't," said Danny with more con-

fidence than he really felt. "You wouldn't buy yourself anything that way."

"I'd enjoy it," said Ed.

"Look." Danny still held his voice level. "You boys are in a bad jam. You've kidnaped Miss Carlson and you know what the payoff on kidnaping is. They'll track you down and when they find you, that's the end."

Sam shifted the rifle threateningly. Danny ignored it. "If the girl isn't hurt," he said, "I'll make a deal with you. I'll promise that the kidnaping angle is dropped if you'll play along with me?"

"How's that?"

"Finger the man who shot Cord."

"It was Jerry Carlson."

"I don't think it was but I have no proof. I've got to try and scare a confession from the killer. I can with your help. If you help I'll see that Miss Carlson doesn't press the kidnaping rap against you."

"What about our twenty-five grand?"

"That's another reason you should be willing to help me. The killer beat you out of that dough. You should want to get even."

Ed was staring at him without liking. He looked at Sam. "There are two cops on that plane. I guess we're licked."

The man with the rifle was mad. "I'll blow the top of his head off and we'll take to the hills!"

Ed vetoed this. "We wouldn't have a chance. We'd better make a deal when we can."

"He'll probably cross us."

"Miss Carlson won't. I know her. Let's go up to the mine and talk it over. If she promises not to press charges, I'll go along with any screwy play this jerk can think up."

Kitty Carlson was glad to see him. Danny felt that she had never been quite so glad to see anyone in her life. He loosened her bonds and told her quickly what had happened. She shook her head.

"I'd hoped you'd cleared Jerry."

He shrugged. "I haven't, actually, but this is worth a try." He looked at Sam. "Go outside and fire your rifle. That's the quickest way to bring them here. Then you two keep out of sight until I get them quieted down." He turned back to the girl and helped rub the circulation back into her wrists, numbed from being bound.

The plane from the plane arrived in a

surprisingly short time. Looking at them, Danny thought this was one of the strangest collections of humanity ever assembled. Tony Mido's patent leather shoes no longer glistened, their shine hidden by the dust of the trail.

Della Brown was sullen, her make-up looked the worse for wear. Hargrave's feet hurt. It was apparent from the way he stood on one, then the other. Pierce was disgusted. Only Lance Squire and the airplane pilot seemed unaffected by the hike.

THE ranch foreman rushed directly to Kitty. "Are you all right?" His voice shook a little. "Where are those two? I'll personally hang them to the nearest tree."

Kitty was composed. "I'm all right," she told Squire. "They didn't hurt me at all and you won't hang them. Danny promised them immunity if they helped him catch the man who shot Cord."

"To hell with that," said Squire. "I don't make deals with kidnappers."

"You do this time," the girl said. "I've given my word."

They stared at each other, the ranchman angry.

Danny looked at him, then said to Hargrave, "I'm going to bring Sam and Ed in. Make Squire behave."

"I'll make him," said Hargrave. His hurting feet had added to his natural ill temper.

Danny left the building. He came back a few moments later with Ed and Sam at his heels.

Both men were uneasy. Sam had not liked the idea of giving up his rifle. He stayed as far away from Hargrave as he could.

Danny looked around. Mido and Della Brown were standing by themselves at one side, with Pierce watching the girl.

Squire was at Kitty Carlson's elbow. The pilot had seated himself against the wall.

Danny took a deep breath. He made his voice sound very confident. "You all know that a man named Cord got himself shot several nights ago. I never met him. I don't give a damn about him one way or another. But Jerry Carlson got the blame. He's out hiding in the hills right now. If they caught him, he'd probably be convicted of murder and that would be wrong because he didn't do it. I know because I know who killed Cord."

Mido's voice sounded very dry, a little strained. "You sure?"

"Certain," said Danny. "You see, the murderer and this man Cord thought themselves up a neat little racket. There are a lot of people from all over the world waiting in Mexico for a chance to get into the United States. The easiest way to smuggle them is to fly of course. But the immigration boys know that too. They watch all the airports close to the border."

Everyone was listening intently.

"But they can't watch every mountain meadow and that's what Cord and his partner decided. They selected this spot. They flew in their human freight and it was held in this very house until Cord's drivers could pick it up. Here the boys proved themselves smart. They didn't merely fly people in; they delivered them to distant states by car so that if any of their passengers were picked up, there'd be nothing to trace them back to this spot."

Danny looked around and then went on.

"But the murderer got greedy. He owed Cord and the drivers twenty-five thousand dollars. He thought no one but Cord knew who he was, so he killed Cord. But he made one mistake. Cord had told Ed and Sam."

As he spoke, Danny could feel the tension in the room build up. His eyes ranged across their faces. Everyone was watching him with full attention.

MIDO'S voice sounded like a file on iron. "If you know, why all this hocus-pocus?"

Danny grinned. "I expected you to ask that," he said. "I guessed some little while back but I needed proof, I needed Ed's and Sam's help. I got them to trade that help to me in return for promising not to press the kidnaping charges against them."

"But if they didn't think it was Jerry Carlson who was guilty, why did they kidnap his sister?" Hargrave could keep quiet no longer.

"Because," said Danny, "the man they were dealing with, the murderer, was in love with Kitty. *Don't try it, Squire.*"

Squire tried it. Squire had had his gun clear of his pocket but Danny's bullet caught his chest, even before the man could squeeze the trigger. The man coughed once; he tried to straighten, tried to focus his eyes on Danny, but he failed. Then he pitched forward onto his face.

It was over that quickly. Later, the strange collection of people were in the air again.

Kitty Carlson spoke against the noise of the plane's motor.

She said, "I still don't see what made you suspect him."

Danny shrugged. "Everything which pointed to your brother would also point to Squire. He worked the ranch. He would know about your river house, that it was an excellent place to meet Cord in town without being seen."

"But he was a friend of Jerry's. To think that he would sit by and let them throw suspicion on his pal."

"He was also in love with you," Danny pointed out. "If anything happened to Jerry, and Squire could marry you, he'd have the ranch. He already had all the money from the smuggling, having kept it for himself by killing Cord. All in all it was a nice set-up for him."

"It would have been without you. What made you start suspecting him?"

Danny shrugged. "I suspected him from the first. As a general thing, anyone close to people involved is a good suspect. Then I ran into the Della Brown-Tony Mido deal. I got to thinking that Mido might well be behind the smuggling. I wasn't certain until coming out here when Squire made a slip. He said there wouldn't be any more smuggling trips. How could he know that unless he was the mysterious boss? So I got Ed and Sam to agree to point the finger at him as the murderer. If he hadn't

cracked, I'd have had to try something else. But he cracked."

"What about the Brown girl?"

He sighed. "She'll be turned over to the feds on a smuggling charge. They have the diamonds. I don't think they can do much to Mido. Personally I think I'll stay out of his way. He thinks I double-crossed him."

"Did you?"

"Probably, although the Gandz brothers would have caught up with Della sooner or later. I had to stir up Mido. If he'd been guilty of operating the planes he'd have acted differently. But forget Mido. How are you going to get word to Jerry?"

"That's easy."

"You mean you know where he is?"

She shook her head. "Not exactly. I know the part of the country he's in. I'll hire a skywriter. I'll have the man fly over the hills and have him write 'checko'. It's a pet phrase of Jerry's and mine. He'll know the message is from me and that he can come out."

Danny grinned. "This is a great age we live in. Messages to fugitive by skywriting. How about a plane ride with me back to L.A.?"

She looked at him. "You know how I feel, Danny."

He said, "You gotta admit the Brown girl was attractive. Did I make a pass at her? I did not. With you around I have no time for other girls."

She looked at him long and searchingly. "I think you mean it. I think that this time I might take a chance. I think. . . ."



Every red-blooded American enjoys a good fight—whether engaging in it himself or watching it or reading about it! The frontier West was famous for its fierce man-to-man fights—the most dramatic kind of combat. On the theory that hundreds of thousands of Americans are in agreement on this, FIGHTING WESTERN MAGAZINE was founded—and the enthusiastic response of the red-blooded public exceeded the publishers' most optimistic expectations. Get a copy of FIGHTING WESTERN at your nearest newsstand, and you'll see why!

Murder Is Sweet

By JO BARRON

I NEVER DID get to the director's Tuesday night party at Malibu. For, that October afternoon found me chugging along in my antiquated coupe toward Abalone Cove, a beach town, some seventy miles southward, getting mixed up with a flower that smelled of death.

One, Artimas Black, had sent for me to investigate the robbery of his small jewelry store, or at least that is what he told me over the phone, with never a hint as to the

real facts. I didn't want to go but I had a very special use for the fee. So I went.

I was bowling along a lonely stretch of road flanked by bean fields when I spied a girl standing beside a telegraph pole, her suitcase at her feet. She had red hair, which reminded me of Halcyon Hallbridge. I offered her a lift but she gave me the brush-off.



Illustrated by William Mellink

Artimas Black was so kind that everyone took advantage of him until he hired Shamus Camrose whose job it was to discover why a cursed bit of jewelry was enough reason to dirty someone's hands with blood!

I shrugged and drove on, a little riled. She wouldn't have been so superior had she known a movie queen had given me a date. I'd gotten the bid to the Malibu party from Solomon Koch himself, the day I got back

his wife's three-thousand-dollar fur coat. We had been talking near his office door when Halcyon walked slowly by, headed for the studio cafeteria. Mr. Koch had introduced us. She'd hesitated and fluttered



He heaved a heavy glass ash-tray at my head and it banged my eye.

those yard-long eye-lashes at me and had said, "I'll see you at the party, Mr. Camrose."

My heart had set up a wild drumming in my white-shirted chest as I swung along beside her. I was glad I had on my best dark suit. Her red head came hardly up to my shoulder and the filmy thing she had worn showed that Powers' models had nothing on her.

"How about Santa Anita on Wednesday?" I had asked, crowding my luck.

She had clapped her tiny white hands and a dimple had come in her smooth cheek. "I'd love Santa Anita—on Wednesday."

So there I was, all fixed up. Dropping down-grade, Abalone Cove at first glance seemed but a highway cross-roads, but now curving into its mid-section I found it a sizable town of three blocks or more in length. Post office and police station, then a string of store buildings all painted a blinding white, which huddled cozily together, shouldering a couple of corner gas stations.

And further on, the usual resort-town night-spots, resplendent with black marble fronts and neon-light tubes for decoration.

Snaking in from the ocean side a narrow street crossed and angled off toward the palisades to some unseen end. Maybe it slanted up by the scattered white houses which clung precariously to the yellow clay banks with ladder-like stairways reaching downward. I wouldn't know.

I PARKED in front of the Arcadian, a square, white-brick apartment building which took in a whole block and whose street floor was given over to glass-fronted shops. The number above the recessed entrance was that given me by Artimas Black. Almost at once I spotted the jewelry store which had been robbed. It was right around the corner. Peebles & Black, in modest gold lettering gleamed at the bottom of the empty show window.

That should be a cinch. I'd run through this investigation quick-like and hie myself back to town in time to catch the Malibu party. I was still in a glow. Me, Donald Camrose, at a top-flight party as a guest, and a date with the prettiest redhead in pictures, for the next day.

Black's apartment was a front one at the head of a flight of marble stairs.

He was expecting me. His face, anxious behind the silky brown beard which came nearly to his eyes, relaxed a trifle when he let me in.

I'd always supposed my six-feet-two gave me the edge over most men but Black's pale eyes were on a level with mine, and his shoulders looked as if he might be wearing a football suit under the expensive champagne-colored gabardine.

"Sit down, Camrose," he said and his voice was suprisingly thin. I sank into the depths of a pink divan. The apartment was something to see, all rose and crystal, strictly a decorator's job.

"Smoke?" Black fingered a cigar from his breast pocket and bit off the end before offering me one.

"Thanks, no, I prefer these," I said and lit a cigarette. "Now, if I could have a look at the store, Mr. Black, we can talk as we go." After one drag I stumped the butt into a glass tray.

Black rose with agility and led the way down a stairway at the far end of the hall. It gave into a court flanked with rear exits. He unlocked the store's back door and we went in.

Between puffs of cigar smoke Black said, "You look like a sensible man, Camrose, a discreet man. I think I can trust you."

He watched me a while longer with his yellow eyes, while I moved around. The safe, an old one, stood ajar. It was empty. Even the showcases had been cleaned out, as well as the costume stuff usually left in the windows.

Out of his hip pocket, Black pulled a bale of greenbacks and counted off five tens. "Expenses," he said and laid two fifties beside it on the glass-topped counter.

I braced myself, trying to look nonchalant. It was good pay.

"I'll double that if you get back the sapphire clip before morning," he said, then fell to describing the piece he was particularly interested in. "Five big blue East Indian sapphires made up to resemble a daisy. A row of small diamonds and pearls surrounding each stone which forms the flower petal. The clip is about two-and-a-half inches across." He paused to let it soak in. I whistled.

"Another thing—" He looked directly at me. "As I said before, I think I can trust you to keep this strictly confidential. You understand."

I nodded. "And the rest of the stuff?"

He made a pushing gesture, "It's insured, naturally. All except this piece. I'm handling it for a client, an important client." He tapped his knee with a ringed forefinger—"and it was promised for tomorrow. I'm positive the store was robbed solely to get the daisy, but no one, not even my partner, knew I had received it." A baffled look was in his eyes and something akin to desperation. "You've got to get it back!"

I said, "Someone must have found out you had it, guessed your secret."

AT that his pale eyes froze over. I could almost feel the chill go through me. "But that doesn't concern me," I hastened to explain. I needed that dough. "Any leads?"

"The local police," he said sneeringly, "have apprehended a young hoodlum, Elkhorn, by name, but they had to let him go." From his tone I gathered his opinion of the local police was anything but flattering.

I knew Elkhorn, or Eddy the Elk, as he was known in his social circle. He was a thief and the slickest fence in six counties, posing as a novelty salesman, usually. "I'll get started," I said, gathering up the bills. "There's very little here to go on."

"Don't let that blue daisy get away." Black's voice crackled like glass breaking. "Detectives are reputedly psychic. If you locate it, let me know at once."

The back door opened and a girl poked in her head. "I—I thought I saw—"

Black said, "Come in, Eve, this is the detective."

Fright sprang to her wide blue eyes when she saw me and her fingers plucked nervously at the string of synthetic pearls at her throat.

"Camrose," I said, "Donald Camrose."

"Eve Taylor is my little clerk." Black patted her shapely sweater-clad shoulder in a fatherly fashion and suddenly it would have been a pleasure to sock him in the beard.

She was a small-boned fairy-like blonde and yet it was hard to believe anyone could actually be as innocent as Eve looked.

"I was just going to the drugstore—" She hesitated.

"Good," I put in. "Mind if I go along? How about a coke?"

A look of protest crossed Black's eyes

but he said nothing. I took Eve's elbow and steered her down a tree-lined street. The slanting sun glared into the little cove and fired the windows of the cliff houses with an unearthly glow. The place looked as unreal as a movie set. And I was knocking myself out being gallant to this little dim bulb, who did nothing but stare up at me with those wide blue eyes of hers. But presently over her banana split in the drugstore she was mellow as a cream-sated kitten.

I thought, "It's now or never," and began prying. "If I knew more about her boss' family, his friends, or his enemies," I said, "it would be a great help."

"Oh, I want to help you," she said, "but Mr. Black couldn't possibly have enemies. He's so kind, people are always taking advantage of him." She stopped, then went on in lowered tones. "There's Viveca Rains, his ex-wife. She—she goes 'round with George Peebles now. I hate to talk about her but—she's not a very nice person—not when you know the things she does."

"H-m-m." I said. Before I left her I had learned where Viveca lived, that she had been a night-club dancer and was as heartless as she was beautiful. I got a description of George too, physically and morally, painted of course by Eve's ardent admiration for Artimas Black. At least Black had a loyal employee, I thought, and I put George down as something of a wolf.

WHEN I left Eve in front of her building, which was the same as Black's, I had a date for later that evening. I had the uncomfortable feeling that Eve was holding out on me. Perhaps later I could find out what it was.

I walked into the first likely looking bar and bought a beer, noting the sullen-faced young barman behind the polished mahogany counter. I said, "Gosh! For a minute I thought you were Gary Cooper. Ever hear that before?"

His face lit up at that. He said, "You a talent scout, mister?"

"Not exactly," I replied, "but I have connections."

Then I glanced at my wristwatch and frowned. "Fellow named Elkhorn was supposed to meet me here."

"What's he look like?"

"Slight, college-boy type with sleepy gray

eyes and a yen for sport jackets and other people's belongings."

"If I was him," the barman said, "I'd likely go to the Rainbow Hare." He mopped the already dry spot before me with studied unconcern.

The red-and-green neon rabbits jumping crazily above the entrance of the Rainbow Hare were draped in scarfs of fog when I arrived there. Early darkness was fast closing down and the cafe's interior was dimly lit and air-conditioned. The customary serpentine bar wriggled along one mirrored wall, with its low-backed, padded stools. The air smelled faintly of cedar and almonds.

Already the place was filling with customers and a few couples danced on the black bakelite floor, to a juke-box tune. It was there I spotted Eddy. He was leading around a bejeweled dowager, paying her the most flattering attention. Of course he had his eye on the swag around her fat neck. Finally I caught his attention and he came over to my side.

"So it's you again," he said, sliding gracefully onto the padded seat and signalling the waiter. His youthful appearance still held up, although I knew he was far in his twenties. He had brains besides good looks, and if there had been a shady deal in jewelry he'd know something about it. And Eddy, for a consideration, had been helpful to me in the past; that is, provided his own hands were clean. He had no friends.

"You've got nothing on me, Snooper," he said. His recent brush with the police had made him wary.

"You're the most distrustful person," I told him, and decided that this time Eddy was innocent. The waiter brought Eddy's martini and my beer, which I didn't drink, saving my thirst for champagne they'd pour at the Malibu party later.

I described the sapphire daisy clip while I rolled a ten-spot into a spill between my fingers. "I wonder if you might have seen it?"

He gazed deep into his glass, sleepy-eyed. "Smells like an amateur job. None of the stuff showing up. But the daisy now. Let me think. Would it be a small item from over the sea, perhaps?"

"Come on. Give," I said, my nerves tensing.

A scrumptious blonde, with a weakness for pink ladies, wore a clip like that in this

place, last Saturday night," he said. "That's all I know."

I STOOD up, knowing he had spoken the truth. "And you didn't follow her home?"

"She left before I could even get a good look," he said disgustedly.

I slipped him the bill. "I hope you've earned that."

His heavy-lidded eyes followed me as I walked off to find a telephone. It wasn't much to report to my current boss but I gave him what little I had.

"Does it make sense to you?" I asked.

"My ex-wife likes pink ladies," he said. "But no—no, it couldn't have been she. She wouldn't dare."

"In my book," I told him, "it could be anybody, even your best friend."

In view of my information on Viveca's character, I was inclined to think that Black had underestimated her. And I decided on a plan of my own. If Viveca had the daisy, all I had to do was make her admit it. That would prove I was right, and if I could prevail upon her to show it to me, agree to sell it perhaps, the job was through. I'd collect the other half of my fee and scam.

The approach I finally settled upon as I plunged through great puff-balls of rolling vapor toward Viveca's house was on the fantastic side. But the whole set-up seemed incredulous to me. East Indian sapphires with a good, old-fashioned black curse of black death attached that would fall upon anyone who possessed them. It was far from original but it was the best I could conjure up at the moment.

There was just a bare chance she would fall for it.

I mounted the long, wooden stairs to the tall, white frame house which sat on a narrow, man-made terrace, against the clay bank rising steeply behind it. And there was less than ten feet of turf from the edge of the porch upon which I stood, to the lip of the cliff in front. It was the house Viveca had won in the divorce from Black.

Later I realized it would have been infinitely better had I acted upon my impulse at that point and tossed the whole, dirty business back into Black's silky beard. It was taking a lot longer than I'd figured and the Malibu party wouldn't wait.

I rang the doorbell and looked down upon

the roiling sea of gray cloud-stuff turned pinkish in spots by the street lights below, and wished to hell I was out of there.

A light went up inside and the door opened a crack. A young woman's face of unusual beauty looked out at me. She wore a white velvet thing draped about her bare shoulders, a nest of platinum curls topped her shapely head, and a look of surprise sprang to her slanting greenish eyes when she saw me. Surprise and consternation. Clearly she had been expecting someone else.

"Oh!" Her full, rouged lips formed a perfect letter "O" and she waited for me to speak.

I TOLD her my name and turned on the charm full-force. I'd like a word with you on a confidential matter. May I come in?"

"What confidential matter?" she asked coldly, holding her position in the doorway. She wasn't softening up a bit.

"To put it crudely," I said, "I'm here to offer you a good price for the sapphire daisy clip." I watched her green eyes flicker. "It was sold by mistake," I continued, "with some other jewelry. The owner is doubly anxious to have it back—is prepared to pay to get it." Then I put on the spiel, East Indian curse and all the rest of it." I don't know how much she believed of what I said. I ended up with, "Now if you'll just let me see the ornament, we can talk terms without more loss of time."

"I don't know what you're talking about!" she snapped.

"Now don't give me that, Miss Rains," I came back, letting her know she was no stranger to me. "You wore that clip last Saturday night at the Rainbow Hare. Remember?"

She studied me silently for a minute, then said, "I did? Tell me more about this deadly gem whose contact causes one to die of the plague. Perhaps I will know whether I've come under its baleful influence."

I described it once again, enlarging upon the menace. She broke in sharply, "How much is your offer?"

So she was interested after all. I sensed a violent undercurrent of excitement stirring in her; the green eyes came alive like moving water.

"I can't tell you that," I hedged, "until you show me the right ornament."

She hesitated, then a cunning overspread her face. "You interest me strangely." The twin sickles of her eyebrows arched. "See me later tonight. Maybe we can make a deal. Yes, maybe we can." She quickly closed the door. And that was as far as I got.

I turned and felt my way down those treacherous steps, made doubly dangerous by the clinging mossy growth on the planks. I had the feeling of being watched from below. I lost no time getting away from there and losing myself in the murk. Eve was ready for our date when I reached her place.

"You're right on time," said she brightly. "Come in while I get my coat."

The apartment was nicely furnished, indeed. Soft blues, bright, flowered drapes and deep-piled rug. I wondered how she could afford it on a clerk's salary. Through the open bedroom door I could just see her reflection in the vanity mirror. She turned her head this way and that, changing earrings. Then she brought out a fur coat for me to hold. The coat was dyed rabbit and the large yellow beads around her slender young throat were pure glass. A red ribbon that didn't quite match her dress held back her shoulder-length bob.

She switched off the light and as we went out, I closed the door after us. She said, "Did it lock all right?"

"It's okay," I said, hustling her toward the head of the marble staircase.

EVE was gay, chattering about the show, the weather, Mr. Black's kindness, and Viveca's meanness. "She can't let him alone, always asking me if he has dates—"

I settled her in the theater and in a few moments excused myself to make a call. I knew she'd get to wondering after a while, but by that time I'd have done this little job. Soon I'd know what was cached in Eve's apartment, if anything was. I tore back to the room we'd just left and let myself in. I'd seen to it the spring latch was left off. I couldn't whole-heartedly believe in Black's goodness or in Eve's idyllic simplicity. Both, to my mind, were overplaying the part.

I wanted to make sure the loot hadn't been hidden right under my nose. I didn't know what to make of Viveca's cryptic

statements. She knew something, of that I was sure. Moreover, I was beginning to suspect. I had run into one of those muddled family affairs, where the outsider comes out with a swollen head after the participants in the fight had come to terms.

However, as far as I knew, Black had lost a valuable piece of merchandise and was paying handsomely to recover it. And if I expected to make the Malibu party, I'd have to step on it.

The vanity and dresser drawers yielded nothing. A faint tang of Oriental perfume hung in the room. I looked in the clothes closet and at that moment someone shoved me forcibly forward, and slammed the door, locking me in.

"Hey!" I shouted. "What's the idea?" No response came except the vibration of quick footsteps going away. To telephone the police, I concluded dismally. And I'd been right, Eve wasn't so dumb. Obviously, I'd be charged with housebreaking. McConnell, the young police officer I'd contacted at his desk that afternoon, looked efficient and in deadly earnest. Oh, I was smart, all right.

I've heard a lot about breaking down doors with the well-aimed shoulder but for me it didn't work. I threw my weight again and again against the panels. Nothing gave. Then I slid to the floor, braced my shoulders against the opposite wall and pushed with my feet against the door.

As suddenly as it had closed, the door flew out and I scrambled to my feet. It was Eve's outraged blue eyes confronting me. She said, "What are you doing in there?"

Her voice sounded more hurt than angry. I brushed at my clothes, the blood burning in my face, and smiled sheepishly at her. "Playing hide and seek."

"I don't believe it. I'm going to call Mr. Black." She marched away but I caught her arm.

"Don't do it, Eve," I begged. "I'll explain everything, I promise. Don't you trust me?"

"Well—" She eyed me uncertainly. "If you're sure—" and then, "Was she here—that woman?"

"Miss Rains?" I asked. "Why?" Maybe it hadn't been Eve who locked me in the closet after all.

"Yes." She wrinkled her nose. "I smell her perfume. I'd know it anywhere."

Excuse me, Eve. I have to go now," I

said. I'll be back shortly and take you to the Rainbow Hare. What say, Baby?" I glanced at my wristwatch. It read ninety-fourty.

OUTSIDE the visibility was zero. Fog masses received me, shutting me in as completely as if a sack had been pulled over my head. The few dark shapes scuffling by were just shapes with hollow voices or no voices at all. I kept close to the buildings, and aided by my flashlight I floundered through endless tortuous ways to Viveca Rains' hillside house.

The first floor was dark but upstairs the front window glowed with a sickly light.

Of course I could have rung the doorbell. Viveca was more or less expecting me back, but a hunch prompted me to climb the sturdy trellis to the sun deck for a private peek into the lighted room. It wasn't the first time my hunch had paid off.

It was a sitting room of sorts, and through the slatted Venetian blinds, I could see Viveca, in a dark dress now; and seated facing her, a youngish man. This would be George Peebles. As for size and build he could have doubled for me any day.

They were highly elated and engaged in a spirited conversation but I couldn't make out their words. Viveca zipped open her patent-leather purse and took out the blue daisy clip and fastened it on her bosom. It was a gorgeous jewel, the showiest thing I'd ever seen. I nearly fell off the sun deck with surprise for I hadn't quite believed Viveca was mixed up in the mess.

Now all I had to do was get hold of Black. Cautiously I dropped to my knees and crawled down the slimy trellis. Touching solid ground with my feet, I reached for my breast-pocket handkerchief to wipe my hands, when out of nowhere half the house fell on my head.

Automatically I whirled, and grabbed a handful of cloth, but it wasn't any use. The rest of the house struck me then and I sank into nauseous oblivion. I didn't even taste the grit and dead leaves, as my face scraped the dirt.

It was the scream that really woke me. A sound that was thin and sharp with horror broke through to my consciousness but I couldn't raise my head. There was soft shuffling noises but my pain-paralyzed brain could not identify them. I lay still,

taking shallow breath, and waited for my head to clear.

At last I sat up, spit the gravel out of my mouth and tried to think. Someone had obviously followed me. My first guess was Eddy the Elk. I might have expected it, the dirty rat. I had to get to a telephone fast.

Seeing the house now dark and silent above me, I rose and staggered toward the descending stairs. The fog was a smother of sticky wet cobwebs across my face and I clung to the side rail going down. At the bottom my foot brushed against a soft object.

What was revealed by the feeble beam of my flash didn't register at first. I was still woozy from the blow on the head. Realization, when it struck, was like a vicious kick in the stomach. I bent down for a closer look and saw the silken perfumed bundle was a woman. It was Viveca Rains and she was very dead.

She wasn't glamorous any longer, sprawled there with her head turned too far around and her face a bloody sodden pulp. The blue daisy was missing from her dress.

THE ELK was no doubt even now loping out of town with the jewel in his possession. Still there was something wrong with that picture. He wasn't a killer, yet you never could tell.

Swiftly I examined the macadam surface beneath and around the corpse, knowing in advance it was useless, for whoever had pushed Viveca off the cliff was fighting for the blue daisy.

In any case I had no time to lose. Stumbling at a half-run I made an all-night gas station that had a phone.

I dialed the police station and when they came in, I yelled, "I want to report a murder at seven-forty-two Sun Terrace! The body is in the street."

I told them who I was and where they could find me, and slammed up the receiver before they could order me to stay with the dead girl until they arrived. I ran down the hill and double-timed up to the Arcadian, the route by this time being familiar to me, even in the encompassing darkness.

In my excitement I rushed in on Black without knocking. He whipped around and stared at me, his mouth agape.

"I almost had the daisy," I babbled, when I had my breath. "Viveca Rains had it and

somebody killed her for it. Same guy bopped me too. Might have been Elkhorn, you know."

"Then why aren't you after him?"

Not until then did I notice the pulled-out dresser drawers and the half-packed suitcase on the bed. "Where are you going?"

"I've just had a long distance call, have to leave for San Francisco!" he said, a note of hysteria in his voice. "Important business."

"Not so fast," I said. "The police will want to ask you some questions first."

"Police? Why me?" His small eyes above the brown beard ricocheted round the room.

"Because it was you who wanted the blue daisy," I said. "Viveca had it, now she's dead, and the daisy is gone from her dress."

"George was there — he wanted it too," said Black. "So did Elkhorn and who knows how many other people. And how do you know it isn't hidden some place in Viveca's house?"

That was so. I hadn't stopped to search the house. It would have taken hours.

He spoke again. "And for all you know, Viveca might have slipped on the—"

Black turned and tossed a shirt into the suitcase and suddenly deep in my consciousness a bell rang, and I knew it was of the utmost importance that I detain him. I hadn't told him that Viveca was at the bottom of the stairs and I hadn't mentioned anything about George.

"Besides the police didn't know about the daisy!" he snapped. "That's what I hired you for."

"They know now," I said.

"You idiot!" he stormed and slammed the suitcase shut. "You blasted fool." He swung a haymaker at me, which I dodged. "Get out of my way!"

But I couldn't let him escape. I locked my arms under his brown-bearded chin and hung on, my legs tangled with his. I tried desperately to trip him. He staggered 'round and 'round the room, beating at my knees, clawing at my constricting arms. It was the dizziest piggy-back ride I ever had in my life.

It couldn't last, the odds against me were too great. Black threw himself backward like a killer horse, determined to unseat and crush his hateful rider in the dust. That jarred me loose but I caught his

gun arm before he could point the weapon he was fumbling for at me.

I gave it a twist, and screaming with rage, Black dropped the gun, which I promptly kicked across the pink rug. He was up and heaved a heavy glass ash-tray at my head. Again I ducked but not fast enough. It caught me a glancing blow over the right eye. Blood blinding me, I closed with the big man and pounded my fists as hard as I could, right in his face.

WHEN McConnell and his two men burst in, Black lay flat on his back, out cold. A lucky punch had done that.

"Am I glad to see you!" I told McConnell, and dabbed at my cut forehead with my handkerchief.

"The officer said, 'Looks like you had quite a battle.'"

I stared at my handkerchief but not at the blood on it. Suddenly it all became clear, the thing that had been teasing my mind all through the fight. I held out the badly soiled linen square. "See that, McConnell? It's green paint," I said. "I got it on my hands, climbing the trellis on Viveca Rains' porch. Somebody hit me when I made a grab for him." I pointed to Black who was still out. "See that stain on his coat sleeve?"

McConnell compared the paint smudges and nodded his head. "Matches, all right."

"Ten to one there's your killer," I said.

Handcuffs snapped on the slowly awakening Black. The officer said, "We found George Peebles beat up in the room upstairs."

"Just a parcel of small-time crooks falling out, and one turned murderer," I said. "He knew Viveca was at the foot of the stairs without anybody telling him."

"Is this what all of them are after?" The officer searching Black held the ornament in his open palm. It glowed and gleamed like some rare poisonous jungle flower, giving out blue sparks.

"That's the piece," I told him. "Viveca had it just before she died."

McConnell said to his men, "Take him away. Suspicion of murder." And they led him away.

"It tallies with what Peebles was able to tell us," said McConnell, running his long brown fingers through thick black hair and replacing the cap. "He said they knew Black was trying to cheat them out

of their share of the profit. That's why they robbed the store. He said they were stymied until you told Viveca where the daisy was."

"I told her!" I slumped into a cushioned chair, lit a cigarette and tried to think back. "It must have been something I said unawares that gave her the information."

I thought a moment and went on.

"Black mistook me for George in the fog when he hit me, I'm sure of that."

"But when he got inside he saw his mistake," McConnell supplied, putting the puzzle together. "That accounts for his fight with you. He probably thought you recognized him as your attacker. The woman crashed through the French window onto the sun deck and pitched to the street."

I CAUGHT a slight scraping sound in the hall and jerked the door inward. Eve stood there in a long pink robe.

"I've been listening," she whispered miserably. "I can't believe it. It's too horrible." Her eyes widened when they fell upon the blue sapphire daisy lying on the glass-topped cocktail table.

I pounced. "Eve, did you ever see this jewel before?"

She lifted frightened little-girl eyes to mine. "I only borrowed it," she said faintly. "Mr Black was so kind, he often let me take cheap costume jewelry to wear."

"He didn't let you wear the blue daisy?"

"No." She shook her blonde head. "As a matter of fact, he had already gone for the night when I saw it. It was new but I took it, knowing he wouldn't care if I wore it."

"And you went to the Rainbow Hare?"

She nodded. "Alix Pearson and I, but we didn't stay long. Because Viveca and George came in and the way Viveca looked at me, I knew she was going to ask me questions again about Mr. Black."

"Viveca remembered she had seen the daisy on Eve's dress last Saturday night," I pointed out to McConnell. "She knew right where to find it after I had described it to her. And it was Viveca who locked me in the closet."

"And it cost her her life," said McConnell, slipping the clip in his pocket. "Clever of Black to hide it in plain sight."

"Good work, Camrose," said the officer.

"I'd never have swung it alone," I told him. I turned to Eve. "If you hurry we'll just make the Rainbow Hare." It was too late for the Malibu party anyway.

BOUGHT SILENCE

Illustrated by
Joseph Sokoll



He reeled, staggered against a big lamp which fell with him.

There was only one way to handle this bird but O'Malley had misjudged him—so that the outcome was sure to be the end of Bob O'Malley!

By RAY CUMMINGS

DETECTIVE ROBERT O'MALLEY said grimly into the telephone, "I'll run him off—don't worry about that."

"But Bob—Bob dear—"

He could hear that his sister was frightened. "Take it easy, Gracie," he said.

"I shouldn't have told you! You haven't seen him yet, have you, Bob?"

"Not yet. But I damn sure will."

"I got thinking about it—Oh, I don't want to have any trouble with him."

"I won't have any trouble with him," O'Malley retorted. "I'll run him off, shut him

up. When he finds there's no more gravy, he'll quit."

"Oh, Bob, I hope so!"

"He will. Why wouldn't he? Frightening you, Gracie, is one thing—dealing with me is something else again. Blackmailing is too dangerous a game even for a swaggering, conceited ass like Torgson. He'll know I'd wind up with enough evidence to arrest him and convict him. Which is what I damn sure would do. And I'll tell him so."

"You're right, of course," Gracie admitted tearfully. "But I do hope it won't come to that."

"It won't."

Blackmailing was such a despicable crime. It depended so wholly on the human weakness of its victim. There was only one weapon against it but the weapon was invincible. Refuse to pay a blackmailer and his motive is gone.

"You think you can get my bracelet back from him?" Gracie was saying. "The money I was fool enough to give him doesn't matter now. But I shouldn't have given him the bracelet. If you could get it back—"

O'Malley remembered the handsome diamond bracelet Gracie's husband had given her just a few months ago, when they had been married a year.

"If he's still got it, maybe I can get it back," O'Malley said.

"You'll try, Bob?"

"You're damn right I will," O'Malley told her. "Take it easy now, Gracie. Don't worry."

He hung up. He was smouldering with his anger. He sat pondering how he should handle Torgson. . . .

Robert O'Malley was a Private Detective with a business of his own at which he was doing fairly well. He was a small, wiry man in his late thirties. In appearance he was mild. Deceptively mild. He had thin, sandy hair and pale blue eyes with tiny creases around them from smiling so much, because essentially he was a good-natured fellow, the sort who could see humor in almost everything. One might expect it would be easy to bully him—if you don't know him very well. But it would be a great mistake.

In a fight, as had sometimes happened throughout his checkered career, little Robert O'Malley was surprising. What he lacked in size and muscular strength, he made up in agility. All his movements were lithe, catlike. It came natural to him to

think quickly and to react with movements incredibly swift. Doing the unexpected was his speciality. Several times a hulking adversary had been astonished to find himself handcuffed and helpless in the midst of a brawl he had thought he was winning. O'Malley had a knack for handcuffs. As a sleight-of-hand performer he would have been superb.

AFTER he hung up the receiver, at the end of the phone call from his sister, O'Malley sat for a moment staring into space. His usually mild blue eyes were strangely dark; his lips were pressed together into a thin, pale line. It was nine o'clock, a gloomy, October evening. O'Malley was alone here in the house.

He was a bachelor. It was a small, two-family, detached dwelling at the end of a straggling street near the edge of town. Just a few minutes ago the family downstairs had gone to the movies. It would be midnight or near it, before they got back to the house.

On impulse O'Malley suddenly reached for the telephone again and called a bar and grill where he knew big Jim Torgson often was to be found. Luck was with him. When paged, Torgson presently came to the phone.

Torgson would come here. He was cagey. He pretended surprise at hearing from O'Malley, now after some four years. For a few months, four years ago, Gracie had been engaged to Torgson. O'Malley had strongly disapproved of it and had said so. But his sister was an impulsive girl of nineteen. She thought she loved the big, handsome thirty-five-year old Torgson; she was engaged to him before she had stopped to realize what she was getting into. Then after a few months she had seen him for what he really was, a swaggering, shifty adventurer, unreliable, unscrupulous; and she had broken her engagement.

"Sure I'll drop in," Torgson said in his drawling, ironic, conceited voice. "Just for old times sake, eh?"

O'Malley sat in his small living room, listening to the silence of the house and the night wind in the trees outside, waiting for Torgson to arrive. An hour passed; then O'Malley heard the buzzer of his bell from the front door downstairs. He clicked the lower door open, went out into the hall with his small slight body bending over the stair-

well as he watched the burly Torgson coming up.

"Hello," O'Malley said. "You came. I didn't think you would. Come in, Torgson."

In the living room, Torgson tossed his rakish felt hat to a table and gazed around.

"Gracie told me what's been going on," O'Malley said with sudden directness. "So I thought we ought to have a talk about it. Just the two of us here. Sit down. Make yourself comfortable."

O'MALLEY sat in a small easy chair. It was somewhat in shadow. He gestured to another by the big floor lamp that cast its soft circle of illumination on the chair, table and rug. But Torgson didn't sit down. He stood smiling; his hand went up, smoothing his wavy dark hair with a gesture. His big brows were raised quizzically.

"Something going on with Gracie?" he asked. "I told you over the phone I don't know what that means." And then he added, "Just two of us here? You wouldn't be fooling me, would you, O'Malley? I don't want to get something hung on me if you've got an old grudge or anything. Mind if I look around?"

"Don't talk rot," O'Malley said.

"You're a detective," Torgson said. "Maybe a vindictive one?"

"Go ahead, take a look all you damn like," O'Malley said.

Torgson was still smiling as he looked the place over. "The people downstairs went to the movies," O'Malley said contemptuously. "Shall we talk?"

"You can," Torgson said. He stretched out in the chair and lighted a cigarette. "Go ahead. Glad to listen."

But it was a bluff. O'Malley could see it. Torgson was tense; his eyes under the heavy black brows still roved the room.

"Here it is," O'Malley said. "Gracie's been foolish enough to meet you, down there along the river road behind her home. Three or four times so far—twice after dark—"

"Well, well," Torgson smiled. "This is interesting. Why did she do that?"

O'Malley's quick temper was flaring but he held it in check. "Because you phoned her a month ago, threatening to tell her husband that she'd been arrested—back when she was nineteen and engaged to you."

It was such despicable business. Gracie was happily married now to the minister

of one of the local churches. She should have told him and he would have understood, of course. At nineteen, an impulsive girl infatuated with this Torgson, Gracie had suddenly found that Torgson was in great need of money. A jam of some kind. It was he who had slyly suggested how Gracie could lift a few articles of value from one of the New York stores.

But when she was caught, she had stood by him, denying that he knew anything about it.

Gracie was pathetic. It was all so obvious that the judge had given her a suspended sentence. And Torgson had been smilingly suave. There was proof of nothing against him, of course. . . . Those were the real facts. Gracie's husband would understand but you couldn't explain the details to the members of his parish. The women particularly. The women who would buzz with it. . . . Did you hear that Dr. Livingston's pretty, young wife is nothing but a jailbird? Torgson, a month ago, had pictured it to Gracie like that. . . .

O'Malley, as he thought of it, was itching now to crack this conceited, arrogant fellow across the face. . . .

"You say she's been meeting me on the sly?" Torgson was saying. "All right, if you say so."

"And so far," O'Malley said, "She's bought your silence with a total of four hundred and sixty dollars."

TORGSON'S brows went up but his damnable smile still held. "She has?"

"With your demands getting bigger," O'Malley said. "And then, last time, she gave you a diamond bracelet. It happens that there's a sentimental value attached to that bracelet."

"You mean her husband will miss it and get suspicious?" Torgson put in. "Too bad she lost it or whatever she did with it."

"And I want it back," O'Malley said evenly. "To hell with the money. Your blackmail game's over, Torgson. I'd run you in if I had enough evidence—maybe I could get it at that. Anyway, have you still got that bracelet?"

"Got it?" Torgson asked. "I never had it. Do you think I'm going to admit all this string of lies? Don't be an ass." Then suddenly he seemed to reach a decision. He added, "Suppose I put some cards on the

(Continued on page 78)

The morgue's new tenant was about to be moved to Potter's Field so Private Detective Lane had to work fast — and all he had to work with was a little brass disk that seemed to hold enough in it to set some minds on finishing

THE BIG KILL

By NORMAN A. DANIELS



"I keep a lot of money handy in this establishment!" he boomed.



Illustrated by Al Savitts

NADINE BRAND weighed about a hundred pounds even. She had soft, amber-colored hair that she wore long, to her shoulders. Her eyes were the same hue as the hair. Disconcerting eyes because they seemed to be

filled with all the innocence in the world. She was, I guessed, about twenty.

She said, "I'm sure you are the man I need."

I chewed reflectively on the rubber tip of a pencil and looked at her over the top of

my desk. She seemed to be almost lost in the big leather chair.

I said, "Miss Brand, this isn't a usual job. It may turn into something very difficult and quite impossible. You don't find out why a man committed suicide as easily as you check on a murder. It wasn't murder, was it? You're not trying to make it look like that?"

"No," she said and her red-rimmed eyes filled with tears. "No, Mr. Lane. It was a suicide. He . . . jumped off the roof of the apartment house where I live."

I knew the place. It was forty-six stories high. David Monroe must have made quite a splash.

I said, "Okay, I'll look into it. When I start I keep on without a single damn whom I may hurt. That's understood. Sometimes the answers I'm sent after don't come out as my clients may wish or hope."

She put some bills on my desk. The top one was marked One Hundred and I thought the others matched.

"It will be worth a thousand dollars—in advance," she said, like a grand was peanuts. "If you need more, I can furnish it. I'm not poor."

I thought, "You're damned right about that." Nadine Brand was worth a few million bucks.

I shook her gloved hand, made some notes and promised I'd report on whatever progress I made. I led the way to my front-office door and decided I'd better spend five bucks of that grand and have the glass paneling repaired. With clients like Nadine Brand a cracked glass door doesn't show success. Also I figured I'd have the sign changed from Gerald Lane, Private Detective, to Private Investigations. It sounded better.

Then I went back, sat down behind my second-hand desk and allowed myself the pleasure of feeling one grand slide through my fingers. It was a nice sensation. My fees usually ran to thirty bucks. I'd have to give Nadine her money's worth if I was forced to relate some fairy tale.

I TAXIED to the Times Building and bought up an old paper which related the death of David Monroe. There wasn't much. Dave Monroe achieved importance only by the fact that he was engaged to marry Nadine. It seemed Dave had visited Nadine that night, left her about midnight and

walked six or eight miles of steps to the roof.

Without her seeing him do it, he'd left a suicide note saying that he had ample reasons for taking his own life and she should forgive him. The note had been found on a table in the foyer of Nadine's apartment by the cops who investigated. Yet Nadine hadn't noticed it. That sounded fishy to me.

Anyway Dave sat on the roof for about an hour, making his peace with whatever he wanted to make peace with. Then he'd simply slid off the parapet and sailed down a few miles. And I was supposed to find out why he'd done such a thing.

I read the items on my way back to the office. I climbed the single flight to the second floor and found a man leaning against the wall outside my door. He was about fifty, a bruiser, but in a nice sort of way in that his clothes were the type which didn't appear insulted because he wore them. He had gray at the temples and gray in the fat, bristling mustache he wore. He was one of those types you can like or not. I had no feeling toward him right then.

I put a key in my door, opened up, and he followed me inside. He kicked the door shut and nearly knocked out the cracked piece of glass. He was smiling a little tightly, I thought.

He said, "Never mind my name. A girl came to see you, retained you to find out why somebody took a dry dive. I'm here about the same case but in reverse. How much did you soak her?"

I didn't like him as of then. I walked into my private office and sat down. He matched his steps with mine, never being out of reaching distance from the back of my neck.

"How much?" he demanded again.

I gave him a cold eye. "It happens that things told a private detective fall in the same category with stories related to a doctor, a lawyer or a clergyman."

"Nuts," he said cheerfully. "You birds are in this to make dough. I'm asking how much she laid on the line so I can double it. On condition you either do nothing about the case—or you tell her some cock-and-bull yarn after a week or so of sitting on your fanny. How much?"

"A grand," I said.

He unbuttoned his coat, took out a wallet and counted some bills. He laid them on my

desk. "Two thousand dollars, Mr. Lane. Two thousand fish to buy yourself a few barrels of Scotch or whatever poison you drink. Do nothing about Dave Monroe's death. It's good dough for doing nothing."

I shoved the money back at him. "There's a classic phrase about what you can do with that. Ankle, brother. I'm busy—getting a line on why Dave Monroe decided to make contact with some pavement way down below him."

He did the unexpected. He came around the desk very fast and before I could get up, his fist plastered me on the jaw.

It was no ladylike punch. It had steam and anger behind it. It sent me and my chair toppling backward. Before I could get up he was bending over me and slugging away at my nose, my jaw again and my Adam's apple. It all hurt like hell and I was too stunned to do very much about it.

He stepped back a couple of paces and stood there looking down at me. I wondered what sort of monstrosity he saw. My face felt as if it was spreading in nine directions at once.

He said in a silky little voice, "That's a sample. Next time I'll get serious. You funny-looking tramp—turning down two grand of my dough. Now you get nothing from me but a series of shellackings every damned day you stick your nose into business that doesn't concern you—or Nadine Brand. So long."

He turned and walked toward the door. I got up, opened a desk drawer and pulled out a gun. I said, "Just a minute, Tarzan."

He didn't even turn around. "Go to hell," he said pleasantly.

I shot a chunk out of the door frame. That stopped him cold. He turned and the combination sneer and grin on his face faded for a moment and then became a scowl. That guy could hate with every cell in his body.

I WALKED toward him, the automatic steady in my hand. I said, "Pal, I hate rough guys. Especially when they're bigger than me. Stick your face into the wall and put your hands against it—high. First of all we'll find out who you are and then maybe we'll let you take up where we left off, with a couple of cops."

He studied me intently and decided I meant business. It was a damn good thing he came to such a decision because I'd never meant business so much in my life.

I didn't find a gun on him but I lifted his wallet, backstepped to my desk and dumped the contents out. There was money—a lot of it. There were calling cards, too, and they carried only a name. That of Leon Roland. Nothing else interested me.

I put everything back except one card. I threw the wallet in the direction of the door and told him to scram. He scowled again but the little persuader looked too grim. He bent down to pick up the wallet and I kicked him where the pride is hurt more than the body. He almost fell on his puss. He tucked the wallet away and faced me. That sneering grin was back on his face.

"Maybe I'll kill you for that. If you're worth killing, which I doubt. We'll meet again."

I held my breath for fear the cracked

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glass would fall out. He closed the door very softly and I could hear him whistling as he made the floor creak down the hall. He was a funny sort. I still didn't like him.

I WENT into the bathroom and put cold water on my swollen face. Then I went for that greatest source of information a private dick has—the phone book. I looked up Nadine's number and scribbled it on a pad. She'd know who this character was and why he didn't want Dave Monroe's suicide investigated. I was beginning to think there was more to it than a plain, dry dive.

Then I checked through for the name on that card. Leon Roland had a phone and an address. Quite a natural thing except that they were both identical with Nadine's. He lived at her apartment and shared her phone. That was going to make it very easy—or harder than anything I'd ever handled.

I took a quick run to the morgue. Dave Monroe's body was still there. It seemed he had no relatives. At least nobody came forward and they were considering planting him in Potter's Field. Only Nadine did something about that.

I looked at him. He wasn't much to look at and the two drinks of bourbon I religiously took every time I visited the morgue started rotating wildly. I got out of there and with a five-dollar bill talked a clerk into letting me see what Dave had in his pockets when they swept him up.

There wasn't much. A shattered wrist watch of medium-priced make, a pen and pencil set, a wallet with thirty-two bucks, some change, a fine linen handkerchief—perfumed, and a couple of keys. I palmed the keys as I dumped everything else into the manila envelope.

From the newspaper account I knew where Dave had lived and I went there next. Just an average joint, distinguished from the other Eighty-fourth Street West places by having a brass railing along the steps instead of the usual cast-iron ones.

It was a boarding house. I let the sharp-eyed harridan who opened the door have a flash of my buzzer. Not enough to see that it read Private Detective. She was impressed, or didn't care whether I went to his room or not. I went there, unlocked the door and closed it behind me.

There was a bed. Racine turns those

kind out by the million. A dresser well-filled with clothing. A closet containing four suits, two pair of shoes, a topcoat and an overcoat. The clothing was Fifth Avenue. I found a lot of racing forms, some pawnshop tickets for small amounts and a bottle half full of rye. I'd tasted better during Prohibition but I conquered my distaste for the stuff and drank half of it.

Then I found what I was looking for—if I knew what I'd been looking for. A square, brass disk with just the number three-eleven stamped on it. I knew those plates. They were issued by Ben Janvier, who ran a couple of gambling houses. High class with chips costing twenty bucks. Only well-favored patrons rated these discs. They were the open sesame to the punks who guarded Janvier's doors.

I suddenly made a line for the room door and yanked it open. The landlady decorously dusted the threshold with her handkerchief and gave me a fishy eye.

I said, "We'll forget the prowl if you answer me a question. Where did Monroe live before he wandered into this flea bag?"

She was going to let me have it, but she must have remembered the badge. She said, "He was a guest at the Montmartre. That's the type of roomers I have. Down on his luck a little."

"How much did he owe you?"

"A week. How do I get my money now? Answer me that."

"You could try whistling," I said. "That takes about the least amount of energy. Where did he work?"

"He didn't." She was thinking of her week's rent, and the glamour that had gone with Dave's looks, his clothes and his previous address, was dimming. "The little punk never turned his hand to anything. He played the nags, two bucks mostly. He was always using my phone to call bookies. Him work? Not him—he was too good to dirty his hands."

She was hurling questions at me when I left. I got another cab and went over to the Montmartre. In the lobby I stood out like a herring on a platter of guinea hen under glass. I wanted to see the house man and I knew the tricks. I just sat down and started glaring at everybody, including the desk clerk with the wispy mustache. He stood it as long as he could, decided I was casing the joint for some reason and phoned the house man.

HE WAS a retired cop, big, brawny, and efficient. But he was a dick, too, and a look at my papers convinced him we were in the same general class. He took me to a cubby hole of an office.

I wound a ten-dollar bill around my forefinger and stuck it at him. "Dave Monroe lived here. How long, who did he know and why did he leave?"

The house dick's very experienced hand slid the ten spot from around my finger. "Nice to meet a guy who pays his way, chum. He lived here for three years. He knew a lot of people, anybody who'd stake him to dinner and drinks, on account he was a handsome punk. He left here, personally escorted by yours truly, with a tab of two hundred and sixty bucks to complicate the hotel's income taxes. What's he done besides smearing up the sidewalk at the end of his jump?"

I helped myself to one of his cigars and wished I hadn't. It tasted like the coffee they throw away in a greasy spoon. I said, "That's what I'm trying to find out. How come he got in this classy joint in the first place?"

"In the first place he had dough. Lots of it."

"And what happened?" I knew the answer but there's something in having answers confirmed.

"He dropped it trying to become a millionaire without working. A couple of smart boys worked him over one night about three months ago. That's when we first started to get wise he might be an undesirable guest. Not that we mind our patrons being worked over, but it shows he welched somewhere along the line and that meant he was out of the bucks. You get out of the bucks and you get out of the hotel, friend."

I had my ten dollars' worth, though what I'd learned wasn't helping me find out why Dave had made a swan dive where there was no water. I went to the apartment house where he'd jumped and had a talk with the manager and the night porter who also ran the elevator after midnight. They didn't help much. All they'd heard was the sock his body had made.

I found the manager co-operative, especially when I told him my interests were also those of Nadine. I described Leon Roland, he of the big fists and the vicious temper.



Before I could get up, his fist plastered me on my jaw.

"Of course," the manager said, and confirmed it by naming him. "Leon Roland is Miss Brand's uncle. He lives here, too."

"Moneyed, like his niece?" I asked blandly.

"Well, no. He's an engineer and does all right, I guess, but Miss Brand is worth several million dollars. If you have any dealings with Roland, be careful. He's a mean man when he gets sore and that happens often enough."

I gently rubbed a still swollen chin. "I know what you mean. Well, thanks. Don't tell him I was here."

My next move was obvious. I taxied to Ben Janvier's fanciest joint, walked up to the door and entered a long corridor. There wasn't a soul around and not a sound to be heard. But I knew these places and I knew I was being watched. I took off my hat, like I was going into a church. I fumbled in my pocket, found Dave's brass disc and walked briskly to the end of the hall. I tapped on the door there. It gave off a metallic ring under my knuckles.

It opened and a man in a perfect butler's uniform wanted to know who I wanted. I told him with the brass disc and that changed things. He stepped aside and I went in to face a couple of gorillas masquerading as penguins in stuffed shirts. They looked me over but didn't do anything. The guy in the butler's outfit shepherded me to what looked like a narrow door. He pushed a button, something whirled and

when the door opened, I faced a small elevator.

I GOT in, feeling good and trapped. If those two mugs got in with me, I was due for trouble. But apparently the disc worked its charm and they didn't remember that the number on it was assigned to a dead man. Maybe they couldn't read numbers except those which appear on currency. I didn't know.

The lift whispered its way up. It was impossible to tell how high. The door opened automatically and the full sweep of sound from the gambling joint hit me. It was like stepping into a brand new world.

The patrons were all well-dressed. My thirty-eight-fifty suit wasn't going to fool anybody up here.

I had a good part of Nadine's grand in my pocket and I bought six chips. What they cost me would have kept me in booze for two weeks or better. I put a solitary chip on the red, beside the other bets which consisted of chips in stacks. The bald-headed man who ran the wheel smiled at those with the biggest stacks and gave me a sneer. I lost. I tried again and lost again, until I was fresh out of chips. This couldn't be put on any expense account even if Nadine had agreed to pay one.

"This joint stinks," I said in a loud voice. The wheel man didn't say anything but I knew his foot shifted to some sort of a signal system. These fancy joints can't stand any adverse criticism. Losers are too apt to pick it up and believe what some other guy says.

They came at me from two directions. Just a pair of boys in tuxedos. I suppose they didn't figure more than two were necessary. One of them said, "We have a phone call for you, Mr. Hallenback."

"My name," I said, "is not Hallenback and nobody knows I'm here. Not now they don't, but if what I think turns out to be right, a lot of boys in blue . . ."

He bent closer. "You can walk out, chum, or have them mop you out of the alley. It's all the same to me."

I hit him on his fat throat and he gurgled as he went back. The other one shrugged, reached into his pocket and brought out a sap. Nobody paid much attention. That's the kind of a place it was. The patrons in their gowns and tuxedos could lose five grand, take a second breath and drop five more,

but they wouldn't bother looking at a guy who was going to get his skull caved in.

I made them pay attention. I pulled a Colt .45 and in any kind of a joint that's a lot of gun. The only sound to be heard was that of the roulette wheels which had kept on spinning.

"I say this whole layout is crooked!" I shouted. "I'll say it until I get my dough back and I want to see the man who thinks he can stop me."

Nobody tried. The lug I'd hit was clawing at his throat. The other man stood there frozen in his tracks, but with right arm bent slightly. He had a gun on him and would go for it the second I turned my eyes away. They knew how to handle these things. While I watched him, a couple of others stole toward me from the back. I waltzed to one side and got my back against a nice cozy wall.

THEY knew I couldn't be taken then. Not without some shooting and some cops. I saw a man, faultlessly dressed and looking very much like one of the more important guests, slowly pull down his sleeve cuffs. Just an automatic gesture to keep his hands busy while his brain figured this out. He showed no trace of worry over my gun. He walked straight up to me and bowed slightly.

"If the gentleman will cease being foolish and put his gun away, I shall see that all his losses are promptly returned to him. This house is honest but we do not keep money won from persons who cannot afford to lose it. If you would follow me, sir. . . ."

It was the old steer. Get me away from the company and then give me the heave-ho. That was the way I wanted it played. I gave a sheepish sort of grin and stuck the gun into my pocket. I also stuck my hand in over the gun and let them see what I did.

I followed this sweet guy across the room, trailed by a pair of the hoods. We went through a door and into a corridor with a staircase at the end of it. I heard the door close behind me.

I said, "Okay, here we are. I want to see Janvier. Right now!"

The man in evening clothes stopped walking and turned slowly. He signalled the pair behind me. "So that was just a gag to get to see Mr. Janvier. What are you—dick?"

"Dick. Private, and wise that by simply
(Continued on page 70)

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THE BIG KILL

(Continued from page 70)

asking for Janvier would get me no place, but threaten to bust his joint up and you find him. You're Janvier. Those gorillas wouldn't be as meek if you were only one step above them."

"Very good." Janvier bowed again. "Please come this way. Oh, yes, you do not object to being disarmed? After all, I keep a lot of money in this establishment."

I dug the gun out of my pocket, turned it butt first and handed it over. He accepted the gun, looked at it for a second then at me; and then he laid that gat alongside my jaw. It sent me against the wall and from there on it was more of the same stuff Leon Roland could hand out. The pair of mugs jumped me fast before I could get set.

I woke up on Janvier's yellow leather divan. Janvier sat behind a yellow desk and he was putting a yellow aster into his buttonhole. The whole damn place was yellow. All except that cool, hard-headed gambler behind the desk.

He glanced at me and smiled. "So you're Jerry Lane. I've heard about you. Nothing particularly good but you do have a reputation for getting what you go after. So, suppose you tell me what you want of me."

I swung my legs off the divan and felt every brain I possessed rattle like a stone in a tin can. I put a hand up over my eyes to blank out the light and help me get steady.

Janvier chuckled softly. "Another thing about you, Lane, you work the hard way."

"Hard way nothing," I told him. "I would have cooled my heels for days trying to reach you. Nobody would speak English when I mentioned your name. But, should I attack the integrity of your dump, you'd either show or I'd be taken to you."

I stood erect, swayed a little, but somehow managed to mince my way over to a bar. It was done in yellow. The bourbon was brown and very, very good. I drank it out of the bottle.

Janvier said, "When you leave, take the rest of it with you, Lane. I wouldn't pour whiskey for my dog out of a bottle anyone else drank directly from. Now, what did you want to see me about?"

"Dave Monroe."

He didn't react, just sat there looking at

me with those intense black eyes of his. There was plenty going on behind them though.

"Dave—who jumped to his death a couple of days ago? What would I know about him?"

I carried a chair closer to his desk and sat down. "Dave had one of your brass passes to this joint. Only big players get those, or people you won't let in here without any trouble. Dave wasn't rich enough to be a big player. How much did he owe you, Janvier?"

THE gambler raised his right hand. It had been resting in his lap. So, apparently, had my gun and when I looked into the tunnel end of it, I wondered why I carried such a big rod.

"Some people," he said, "talk too much when they know too little."

I reached into my coat pocket for a match, showing him I had nerve enough to do anything I liked even in the face of a gun. And I hoped my knees didn't touch or the rattle they'd make would cloud our pleasant conversation.

"Cut it out," I said, "You know I'm a private eye. You know I risked a beating up—and got it—to find you. I get paid for taking those chances. So happens Nadine Brand is paying me this time. Does that make sense to you?"

"A little. You don't go far enough, Lane. I'm interested."

"Sure you are. Dave hopped over the rooftop because he owed you a small fortune and couldn't pay it. He was the kind of a kid who'd rather take his own life than saddle his new wife with a gambling debt, even if she was rich. He talked a little, the note he left explained more. Nadine wants to pay up his debts."

Janvier slowly put the gun down. "You're talking a pleasant language, Lane. Frankly I never thought of an angle like that. It's on the level?"

"Why else would I be here?"

"That's true." He arose and went to a big safe that was built into the wall and flush with it. He spun the combination, swung the door open and leafed through

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some papers in a heavy brown cardboard envelope. He came back to the desk and started holding up notes. They were all signed by Dave Monroe and they ran to a sizable figure. I whistled in surprise.

"Must be thirty grand all told, Janvier."

"Forty-two to be exact. Is she ready to pay off to a tune like that?"

I shook my head. "I'll have to ask her. And of course Roland will have something to say about it too."

"Roland? Who the hell is Roland?"

"Her uncle," I said. I'd been watching him closely. He was a good actor, or he really didn't know Roland. The surprise on his face seemed genuine.

He threw the notes on the desk. "Do rich girls always have to have an uncle? He'll kill the deal."

"Not if we run a circle around him," I said. "Which means we work fast. I'll phone the moment I know anything definite. Now get me out of here."

He signaled, and the big guy who'd worked me over came in. I was escorted down a stairway to a side exit. The big gorilla chuckled as I passed beneath a light.

"You don't look so good, chum. Somebody push your pan in or were you born that way?"

I kicked his shins and felt a little better. Then I walked two blocks to a small park, where I communed with a statue of somebody or other. He didn't know me, I didn't know him, so we were content. I sat there thinking. My hunch about Dave Monroe being a punk had turned out right. The brass disc had taken me to Janvier. Roland knew something and didn't want me nosing around. All of which added up to nothing.

I TAXIED to Headquarters and talked to a homicide man who'd been called when Dave leaped to his death. He didn't mind working with me because there wasn't a thing wrong with the case.

"This kid," he said, "was seen going to the roof. He was seen on the roof and he was seen when he jumped. A couple of neckers were up there. Somebody else's wife and somebody else's husband, so they didn't want their names made public. It was suicide without the slightest question."

"What do you know about the kid?" I asked.

He pulled a record folder toward him. "We printed the body, of course, and ran

it through our files. His right name was Mucci. Two brothers in stir, and he missed a murder rap by the skin of his eye-teeth. Just a punk all through and sideways."

I began to see things through a hazy veil. I went to see Leon Roland.

On my way there in a cab, I got the idea I was being tagged. I told the driver to take me to my room first. There I got another gun and made sure it was ready to yap its piece.

As I ran down the steps of my rooming house, I was pretty sure someone ducked out of sight. They were staying very close. I kept going back to my cab and had the driver drop me two blocks away from Nadine Brand's fancy apartment house. There was a drugstore on the corner and I used the phone booth to call Roland.

"You don't like me and I don't like you," I said, "but with Nadine we're on common ground. I've got to see you."

He didn't even ask who I was. "Enter the apartment house," he said. "Keep going straight through the lobby and past the elevators. You'll see an ivory-colored door. That leads into the garden area around which the place is built. Nobody will be there at this hour. Only me."

I hooked the phone, headed for the door, fast, and then came to an abrupt stop. I went back and dawdled over the purchase of some cigarettes. The clerk must have thought I was nuts, trying to decide between two popular brands. But I was watching the drugstore window out of the corner of my eye. The guy who tailed me would have ducked aside fast when I headed for the door but when I didn't come out, he'd have to risk a look-see to find out what delayed me and then I'd spot him.

It was one of Janvier's trained apes. He showed for about a tenth of a second. I paid for the butts, walked out of there without looking in any direction and proceeded straight to the apartment house. I went through the lobby, through the ivory-colored door, and I knew my tail was somewhere behind me and that he'd phone Janvier as fast as he could.

ROLAND was deep in the garden, where it was very dark and well-perfumed with flowers in bloom. I shared the cement bench with him. You couldn't see much here. I took off my hat and set it alongside me before lighting a cigarette.

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Some 5 day return privilege applies.

"You knew Monroe was a punk," I said. "All I know is that you're a fool to have messed around with this, Lane."

"Uh-uh." I shook my head. "For a fee of one grand a man would be crazy not to pry. I pried. Shall I tell the story or will you?"

"You saw Janvier?" he asked.

"Yes. He holds forty-two thousand dollars worth of I.O.U.'s all signed by Dave Monroe. Or do you prefer his real name?"

"Keep it as Monroe," he suggested. "What does Janvier want?"

"Just forty-two grand. Ever strike you funny how a smart guy like Janvier would let such a punk get into him for that much?"

"I'm not a detective. I don't think in those directions."

"I do. Janvier, like all his breed, has dirty work to be done occasionally. So he lets a punk go too deep and then makes him sit up and perform. The punk rolls over like a good dog and gets his I.O.U.'s back. What'd it cost Janvier? Not a damn cent. He wouldn't have let the punk win anyhow. So for some notes that aren't worth the ink they're written with, he gets his dirty work performed. All I can't figure out is what Monroe did for him and how Nadine is mixed up in it."

"You're a smart guy. Find out," he suggested.

"You tell me," I said.

"I'll tell you nothing. That's final. Take it or leave it."

I puffed on my butt contemplatively. "Okay, I'll leave it. I've got enough. Monroe was a punk with a conscience. Strange, I admit, but true. He played Nadine up to a point where she agreed to marry him. But there the conscience came in and Monroe couldn't take it. He jumped. Nadine will like that story. It makes a hero out of the bum."

Roland spoke very softly. "Tell her that, Lane, and I'll kill you."

I sighed. "It does smell, doesn't it? The damndest part of the whole deal is that you know the truth. You wouldn't have tried to buy me off unless you did. So the deal involves you. How? Crooked, or are you just being a good fairy to the girl?"

He got up abruptly. "Good night, Lane. It's been nice knowing you. It will be still nicer if I never see you again."

I heard something scrape very, very lightly somewhere in the darkness. I dug out my gun and thrust it beneath my hat on the bench. Roland started walking away.

I didn't move and Roland came to an abrupt stop. A man had stepped out from behind a large rose bush. I could see his boiled shirt shine dully in faint light from some window up above, facing his court garden.

Roland came back and Janvier came with him. I put my hands in the air fast.

Janvier went over me lightly. He'd taken my gun and wasn't particularly worried. He took a long-barreled pistol from Roland's waist-band. I began to think Roland really meant what he said about killing me if I saw Nadine.

JANVIER made Roland sit down beside me. He was feeling pretty good. "So you're the girl's uncle," he said. "The guy who made Davie jump and cost me a small fortune. How'd you find out?"

Roland said nothing, not even after Janvier slugged him across the face with the gun. Janvier muttered softly, stepped back and levelled the automatic.

"You knew Dave had done a certain job for me. You could have put him in the chair but you didn't and I can guess why. A guess that reveals your one weak spot. The girl! You didn't want her to know. Dave told me she was as naive as someone who'd lived in a convent her whole lifetime. She'd break down if she knew the truth. Well, she'll know the truth unless you talk."

Roland didn't say anything for a long moment. I placed my right hand on the bench and moved it a hair's-breadth toward my hat until my fingers touched the brim.

Then Roland gave a long sigh. "If I tell you, you'll kill me. If I don't you'll probably go directly from here to see Nadine. I'll try to stop you and get killed anyway. So I'll shut up."

Janvier nodded. "You've got courage, I'll say that. I've got to protect myself. Dave wouldn't have jumped unless you knew every last detail, which means you know or have guessed my part. This is now a matter of self-protection."

"What happens to him?" Roland bent his head in my direction.

"He's just a small-time private eye. Nobody'll miss him."

I said, "You mean, Janvier, that nobody will miss you."

I rolled fast as his gun came in my direction. I got mine from under the hat and I shot him through the face. I've shut-

tered dice cubes at a good distance. I hit what I aim at and I aimed at his face.

The cops came quietly. They padded around the garden like they were intruders. They listened to everything Roland said and listened with respect. I backed him up. Janvier had tried to make Roland pay off on those notes of Dave's. Roland wouldn't play.

I was there because Roland had hired me as a bodyguard. Janvier pulled a gun and took a snap shot at one of us. They found the exploded shell and the spent bullet to prove our story. I killed him in self-defense. Later, after we'd signed statements at Headquarters and Roland posted bail for a routine appearance in court where we'd be set free, the pair of us rode back to the apartment house in a cab.

Roland said, "When you shot Janvier, you bought me, Lane. What do you want to know?"

"You had something on Dave. You told him you would expose him if he didn't break his engagement with Nadine and go fall in a hole some place. Dave couldn't do that. Janvier planned all this, to have him make Nadine and marry her. Janvier would have had a field day with her dough then. But if Dave double-crossed him, Janvier would take his life. If he didn't, you'd send him to the chair."

"I underestimated you." Roland grunted. "Maybe it was that crummy office of yours. Dave robbed a place in which I am financially interested. I happened to be there. He shot and killed a watchman. I saw him do it but for Nadine's sake I kept quiet. I wrote out a statement about the whole affair, gave a copy to my attorney in a sealed envelope and I let Dave see another copy so he wouldn't go haywire and knock me off too. He was a killer. The smoothest man I ever met. He won Nadine by being kind and gentle. But I had him; he knew it. He didn't know which way to turn. Janvier had him too. So he took the easy way."

We reached the apartment house. Roland offered me his hand. I didn't see it. I got out and trotted alongside him to the elevators. Nadine let us in. Roland gave me a dirty look and when Nadine went out for the makings of a drink, he stepped close to me.

"You bought me by saving my life," he whispered, "but I could renege. Nadine knows nothing of this. Get that?"

I said, "She paid me a grand. She has something coming for her dough."

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Nadine put a silver tray on the table and Roland went over to fix a couple of highballs. I sat down facing Nadine.

"You heard the shooting," I said. "You know I killed a man?"

She shuddered but moved her head up and down gamely enough.

"There isn't much to the story," I said. "The man I killed was a crook. Dave had been paying him because of two brothers who got in wrong. It was purely blackmail. Finally Dave couldn't take it any more. He told this crook he was finished."

Roland dumped sparkling water over the ice and whiskey. He was watching me. Some of the water ran over the glass and flooded the tray.

Nadine said, "But what has that to do with Dave taking his own life?"

"Look," I said, "it didn't happen that way. Dave went to the roof to meet this crook. There were a couple of gorillas up there. When Dave refused to do any more business . . . Kid, Dave was murdered. He didn't jump of his own accord. The guy fought them to a standstill but they were too many. If the truth could come out, he'd be a hero. The note you found—take a better look at it. Compare it with the writing on letters he may have sent you. It's a fake, put there to make the world believe Dave jumped. He was a hero. But we can't make that public because we have no proof. The only man who could have proved it died a little while ago from one of my bullets. Now do you understand?"

She lowered her head and sobbed softly. Finally she got up and went into another room. Roland came over holding two drinks.

"I made them strong. Have one. How'd you know about the note being faked?"

"You wrote it," I said grimly. "So Janvier and the cops wouldn't get too curious. Maybe to save your own skin if you were suspected at a later date. The note wasn't there when Dave went out. It was there after he was found dead. Nobody entered the apartment except you and Nadine."

Roland lifted his glass. "She'll get over it, quickly, now that she is convinced that squirt was a hero. You lie gallantly and well, Mr. Lane. To you—and an everlasting friendship."

I got out of there later. I had better than nine hundred dollars of Nadine's money. Dough I'd lied to get but I couldn't give it back. A fee I'd never earned.

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SPIRITED ROBBERY

A NEW development in the already vastly extensive technique of hotel robbery recently came to light in Manhattan. One of the morals of this story, as of a number of other stories, seems to be: don't go to bed drunk. A few days before Christmas, a bellboy employed by a midtown hotel was a guest at a house party where he met an affable sign painter who, as the acquaintanceship warmed, tried to persuade the bellboy to let him have a hotel pass-key for the brief while it would take to have a copy made of it. For doing this, the bellhop would receive a cut of the resultant loot. The bellhop indignantly refused. The sign-painter then threatened not only to beat up the bellhop if he didn't cooperate, but to do violence to his family. This got him nowhere.

On Christmas Eve, the integritous bellboy was having a few drinks with another bellboy from the hotel and told him of the sign painter's proposition. The second bellhop at once reported the story to the hotel management.

In the meantime, the sign painter had registered at the hotel. He removed the lock from his room door, from it had a pass-key made, and then returned it to the door.

During the small hours of the morning of December 24th, seven hotel guests were robbed while they slept. Evidently each one had been carefully chosen as a victim, for all were ones who had returned to the hotel filled with Yuletide spirits. It appeared that someone had observed their alcoholic progress through the lobby and had marked them as guests who would be in deep slumber as soon as they hit the sack.

But the sign painter had made a miscalculation in the case of one guest. He was briskly going through his victim's belongings when the victim roused and saw enough of the dim figure before its flight to supply the police with a description.

As soon as the management heard that night of the sign painter's approach to the bellboy at the house party they talked to the lad and from him obtained the house painter's telephone number. Detectives then used this to trace the painter and arrested him. Though he denied the robberies, he was identified by the hotel guest who had awakened.

The house painter, according to the police, has a long criminal record accrued

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during his thirty-six years, including twenty-three arrests. Three times he has been convicted of robbing intoxicated persons. He is, detectives say, one of a ring of five men who recently have been working the pass-key game in New York hotels, always selecting those under the influence of alcohol for their victims. —James Bennett.

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BOUGHT SILENCE

(Continued from page 61)

table, O'Malley? Suppose the pastor finds out his wife has been meeting a man down by the river road at night? A man she was once engaged to. Of course you could trump up this talk of blackmail to excuse and explain it—"

O'Malley's temper suddenly boiled over. He found himself leaping to his feet with the vague angry thought that the only way he could handle this bird was to snap handcuffs on him and tell him he was all finished. That would take the starch out of him so they'd have a better chance of talking.

"Why, you damned rotten, filthy-mouthed—" Never before had O'Malley lost his temper like this. He realized it as he spat out the words. Bad dope—but this thing, with his own sister involved, struck too deeply into him. . . .

He was leaping at Torgson, who was out of his chair at the same instant.

Then O'Malley saw that Torgson was holding an automatic, leveling it so that O'Malley stopped short as though he had struck a wall!

"Stand still, you little ass!" the scowling Torgson rasped. "Put your hands up! You think I came here just to wrangle with you? Not on your life! Sure, there's no proof that Gracie ever went out to meet me! Her husband wouldn't believe anything I'd say! But with you out of the way, I'll convince Gracie, all right! You're just a damn fool to think I'd let you stop me from—"

"If you fire that gun in here," O'Malley's even voice cut in, "you'll arouse the neighborhood and probably take a murder rap." His hands were over his head. He stood with narrowed eyes, his body taut like a little coiled spring.

"Put that gun away."

It was just one of those things—a big, raging, self-confident killer—and O'Malley had misjudged it.

Torgson didn't shoot; he flung the gun, so suddenly that it caught O'Malley on the side of the head and clattered away across the room.

O'Malley reeled, staggered against the big standing lamp which fell with him as he went down. The lamp-bulb crashed. Then in the darkness he felt Torgson's big body

sprawling down, Torgson with a knife in his hand now, a knife that stabbed with red-hot fire into O'Malley's chest. . . The end of Robert O'Malley.

He knew it as the knife slashed at his neck and stabbed again, with the panting Torgson pinning him down, and then with a big hand gripping his crimsoned throat, holding his head down, throttling him. . . The end of O'Malley. But at least this despicable fellow wouldn't bother Gracie any more. . .

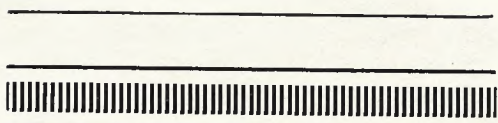
It was the last thought that little Robert O'Malley ever had. . .

A passing pedestrian had heard the noise and the loud voices. The neighborhood was aroused and presently there was a gathering of excited, frightened neighbors outside the house, and then on its porch and down in the lower hall. They crowded upstairs as the police dashed in.

And the killer was there, still up there in the dark living-room. He had had plenty of time to escape but he hadn't tried it. . .

Then the living-room light flashed on. . .

Detective Robert O'Malley had a knack with handcuffs. Glaring, panting, covered with blood and sweat and still gripping his crimsoned knife, big Jim Torgson stood with his left wrist handcuffed to the wrist of his dead victim!



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Makes Muscles Grow
Fast!**


Will You Let Me PROVE I Can Make YOU a New Man?

LET ME START SHOWING RESULTS FOR YOU




**5 inches
of new
Muscle**

"My arms increased
11 1/2" chest 23 1/2"
forearm 7 1/2" —C.
S., W. Va.




**What a
difference!**


"I have
put 3 1/2"
on chest
(normal) and
2 1/2" expanded."
—F. S., N. Y.




**Here's what ATLAS
did for ME!**



**John Jacobs
BEFORE**




**John Jacobs
AFTER**



**For quick results
I recommend
CHARLES
ATLAS**

"Am sending snapshot
showing wonderful prog-
ress." —W. G., N. J.



**GAINED
29
POUNDS**

"When I started,
weighed only
142. Now 170."
—T. K., N. Y.

**CHARLES
ATLAS**

Awarded the title of
"The World's
Most Perfectly
Developed Man"
in international
contest — in com-
petition with **ALL**
men who would
consent to appear
against him.

This is not a
studio picture but
an actual un-
touched snapshot.

Here's What Only 15 Minutes a Day Can Do For You

I DON'T care how old or young you are or how ashamed of your present physical condition you may be. If you can simply raise your arm and flex it I can add **SOLID MUSCLE** to your biceps—yes, on each arm—in double quick time! Only 15 minutes a day—right in your own home—is all the time I ask of you! And there's no cost if I fail.

I can broaden your shoulders, strengthen your back, develop your whole muscular system **INSIDE and OUTSIDE!** I can add inches to your chest, give you a vice-like grip, make those legs of yours lithe and powerful. I can shoot new strength into your old backbone, exercise those inner organs, help you cram your body so full of pep, vigor and red-blooded vitality that you won't feel there's even "standing room" left for weakness and that lazy feeling! Before I get through with you I'll have your whole frame "measured" to a nice, new beautiful suit of muscle!

What's My Secret?

"*Dynamic Tension*!" That's the ticket! The identical natural method that I myself developed to change my body from the scrawny, skinny-chested weakling I was at 17 to my present super-man physique! Thousands of other fellows are becoming marvelous physical specimens—my way. I give you no gadgets or contraptions to fool with. When you have

learned to develop your strength through "*Dynamic Tension*" you can laugh at artificial muscle-makers. You simply utilize the **DORMANT** muscle-power in your own God-given body—watch it increase and multiply double-quick into real solid **MUSCLE**.

My method—"Dynamic Tension"—will turn the trick for you. No theory—every exercise is practical. And, man, so easy! Spend only 15 minutes a day in your own home. From the very start you'll be using my method of "*Dynamic Tension*" almost unconsciously every minute of the day—walking, bending over, etc.—to **BUILD MUSCLE and VITALITY**.

FREE BOOK "Everlasting Health and Strength"

In it I talk to you in straight-from-the-shoulder language. Packed with inspirational pictures of myself and pupils—fellows who became **NEW MEN** in strength, my way. Let me show you what I helped them do. See what I can do for YOU! For a real thrill, send for this book today at once. **CHARLES ATLAS**, Dept. 5311, 115 East 23rd St., New York 10, N. Y.



CHARLES ATLAS, Dept. 5311
115 East 23rd Street, New York 10, N. Y.

I want the proof that your system of "*Dynamic Tension*" will help make a New Man of me—give me a healthy, husky body and big muscular development. Send me your free book, "*Everlasting Health and Strength*."

Name..... Age.....
(Please print or write plainly)

Address.....

City..... State.....



...it was a package of
Cookies

made with



Candy

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